

A Physical Faith

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Preaching on:
Luke 24:13–35

One of my great dissatisfactions with our religion and with Christian tradition is how we and that tradition tend to deal with the physical world and our physical bodies. Typically, at best, our bodies and our physicality, they are neglected or they are ignored. And at worst, they are depicted as sources of temptation and lust and appetite and sin, which are blamed for being less than perfect, for being less than spiritual and are often mistreated. Sometimes that mistreatment is considered to be a virtue.

And of course, one of the things that puts the lie to this entire theology of the mistreatment of the body is that we can see very clearly that different bodies have been treated differently. So we know throughout all of history, and Christian history included, women's bodies have been treated worse than men's bodies. They have been seen as a greater source of affliction and sin than the bodies of men in Western civilization. Almost all of Western civilization, certainly continuing right into our culture to this day, the bodies of people of color, the bodies of black people are seen as a greater source of fear and suspicion than the bodies of white people. The bodies of LGBTQ people are seen as a greater source of sin and lust than are the bodies of straight and cisgender people.

The result is a religion and churches that often feel disembodied to me. What I wouldn't give just for a

little more physicality, a little more movement in the church, for Christian spiritual practices that look just a little bit less like prayer and look something more like yoga. I don't know, something where we can move and we'd recognize that that movement is itself sacred because God is inside of it. I consider all of this to be a serious failing of the way that Christians have interpreted what bodies are and what they mean and how we should think of them. By my reading, the real Christian message is that the physical world that we live in that was created for us is good, good, good. And that having a body and being a creature is in and of itself holy and a miracle. A sunset, by my reading, is an act of God. It is the universe engaging in art. It is intentional, it is purposeful, it is meaningful, and God makes it so. And taking a jog around the block is an exhilarating act of praise to the one who made and formed that body and whose spirit fills it and blesses it.

My reading of Christian tradition is that in the beginning, God created the world and God saw that it was good and God got down—God, GOD—got down in the dirt of the garden of Eden. Can you imagine that? It's really hard to imagine. I think we like to think that it's just a children's story, that the God of heaven and the universe got down on God's knees in the dirt of the earth. And because of that action, you and I have bodies. Isn't that incredible? Oh, and what does that mean?

We were formed not by accident, and God wasn't just twirling a finger around and then we just popped out. No, we were formed in the very image of God. And as Christians, we believe that God became a human being in an act that didn't make God less perfect, as some people claimed it had to do, but that elevated our creatureliness, our human existence to become that much closer to the image of God and to God's divinity and to all the potential that God sees in us.

It is the Easter season. Of course, Jesus Christ, after dying on the cross was resurrected. And that resurrection is scripture's promise to all of us. It didn't just happen to Jesus. It's going to happen to all of us. We are not promised in the Bible a disembodied life for eternity in heaven, as many of us think is going to be our fate. No, we are promised a resurrected life in a resurrected body, in a resurrected world, a physical, eternal existence.

And look at the way that Jesus ministered to us in this world. He ministered to us with touch, with healing of our physical ailments, with food at a table, and with the waters of baptism. Jesus rarely in the Gospels cares for a person spiritually without simultaneously caring for them physically. And in fact, it is often an act of physical care that is the act of spiritual care. So how can we separate them in our churches and in our theology today to say that the physical is one thing and the spiritual is another? To raise the spiritual up above the physical when the spiritual is given to all of us in the form of a physical? And in fact, every spiritual act that has ever been experienced by any human being on this planet has been mediated to them through their physical body, through their physical senses, through their embodiment.

And I already spoke this morning about the sacraments of our worship life, right? I do not believe that

there are only two sacraments, as we say in the church. We say we have two—baptism and communion, but I wouldn't limit them so authoritatively, so certainly. There are just two sacraments that we human beings can perform in church. But the whole physical universe, including our wonderfully and fearfully made bodies are full of the fire of God's creation. Because as Christians, we are not materialists. We believe in material of course, but I do not believe in dead material. I do not believe in a dead universe. Everything, everything physical is full of the presence of God.

So it's strange and painful to me that we the people of the incarnation, the people of the table, and of the waters of baptism, the people of the resurrection, the people of the body—the people of the BODY of Christ so often live and worship in a disembodied way, and that we are so spiritually suspicious of the physical world and our physical selves.

Our culture is now saturated by pornography and violence and consumerism. Our culture treats the physical world like an IT, like something that only has value if we can turn it into money rather than something that has value because God gives it value. And we treat other people like ITS rather than like people. And a religion that can only say bad things about the physical world and about the human body cannot counteract or heal this poisoned way of living and thinking. Because if the world is just lousy and the body is just lousy and we're just waiting for them to disappear and to live a spiritual unspoiled existence, why not objectify everything in this world? The physical doesn't mean anything. It doesn't have any value. Why not treat everything like a commodity that will only be good if we can transform it into some sort of economic value, right? So a forest is only good if it can be made into paper. An ocean is only good if it can be fished. If our children are going to live healthily on this planet, if they're going to live in healthy relationship to their neighbors, and if they're going to have a healthy existence inside of their own skin, we need to give them a positive theology of creation and of incarnation, not a negative one. Our children do not need to be forbidden from the potential problems of their bodies. They need to be taught just how sacred the experience of being God's physical creature truly is, and how deeply connected their spiritual wellbeing is to their physical wellbeing.

I am convinced that our disconnection from our bodies and our cultural objectification of our bodies is one of the causes of our disconnection from our earth and from our environment. If we cannot love the miraculous skin that we are inside of, how can we truly love the incredible life-giving miracle of the planet that we are inside of? A Christianity that does not sing the full-throated praises of God's earth and of the miracle of being alive and a body on that earth will always struggle theologically and practically to connect to the movement for ecological care and for the environment.

Early Christian worship took place not seated in pews upright in a sanctuary. Early Christian worship took place reclining on cushioned benches at a table eating. How I long for that kind of worship. Because there at the table, we Christians declare that we are physical eating creatures, that our bodies matter, that our God is not divorced from the physical world or from our physical concerns, and that our savior, our Messiah, gave us bread and wine and sat at the table with us and served us and

ate with us. In our scripture reading this morning, the truth of the resurrection is mysteriously and weirdly and powerfully revealed. Not in a spiritual display, not in some sermon or theological discourse, but in a physical display—in the breaking of bread. We are a people, a religion of the breaking of bread, of eating and of sharing food.

Yesterday was Earth Day, as I'm sure many of you are aware. So here's one wild idea for Earth Day in 2023. Sustainable farming is an important part of environmental stewardship, and supporting small local farmers is important as well. As is making sure that everyone in our communities has access to healthy, fresh, and nutritious food. And we seem to get this as a congregation. We support very well our local food pantry. We have a little community garden on our south lawn. We seem to have the beginnings of a spiritual understanding here that food deeply matters and that the care that food provides is not merely physical, that it is also spiritual. Could something as simple as starting a CSA—you know, a community supported agriculture, building a relationship with a local farmer to bring fresh produce into our local community—could that be another way to further remind ourselves as Christians and to demonstrate to our entire community what we believe? That we live as though food is sacred, it is good, and growing it sustainably must be important to any community who claims to be a people of the table.

Beloved, it's time to open our eyes. Our planet needs help. Our culture needs help. Our kids need help. In the season of resurrection, let's consider the ways that we can show the world that we are a religion that knows how to treat our bodies, knows how to treat other people's bodies, and knows how to treat our planet with the sacred and dedicated care that they deserve.