

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by Elyse Gustafson on Sunday, April 11, 2010.

John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hands and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

In the name of the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. AMEN.

For the most part, my memory of the second grad is a bit fuzzy. But I do remember that most of its political maneuverings took place on the playground during recess. I remember that there was an established hierarchy of outdoor activities: fifth graders played basketball. The fourth graders played the third graders in soccer. And those in second and first grade were confined to play whatever version of tag was the trendiest that week.

Even as a child, I was a little too abstracted to fully appreciate tag, so I usually just stuck to the swings. But one day I decided to give it a try. Predictably, the patterns of playful teasing eluded me, and I was quickly stuck being "It." I was no better at chasing than I was at teasing, and so when a boy finally let me catch him, I was grateful for the freedom to return to my swing. Chasing other kids around the playground had made my body feel strange to me. Is this body really me? I looked at my left hand. I straightened my fingers, and then clenched them into a fist. This is my hand. How strange to have control over this. I looked at my right hand and did the same. Then I took my right hand and struck my left. How strange to have a kind of control

over the body, and yet to have that control be limited.

I learned a few things about bodies that day. I learned that bodies are solid, and so if you strike one body with another, the two will collide and the collision will cause pain. There is nothing ethereal about bodies. They are composed of flesh and bone and reside strictly within the physical world. I also learned that bodies are confined to a space that is limited. That day on the playground, my mind may have been wandering back to the swings, but my body was stuck playing tag; it was stuck being "It." The body is the space in which a person is located. Where my body is, that is where I am. Though this limitation can at times be frustrating, it is also what enables us to have any connection with the material world. Our bodies are gifts that both limit us and enable us to participate in God's creation.

All this may seem terribly obvious. Of course bodies are solid; of course they are limited. We know these things simply by day-to-day living. But I wonder if highlighting these things for just a moment might help us think a bit about Jesus' resurrected body.

As it turns out, there is very little precedent for resurrected bodies. The Old Testament tells us that Elijah once raised a little boy from the dead. And we also know that Jesus raised both Lazarus and Jairus' daughter. But these stories are very much anomalies, and it seems that there was something very different about Jesus' resurrected body anyway.

Today's gospel lesson gives us a few details about Jesus' risen body. For instance, we know that Jesus was not immediately recognizable to his disciples. Jesus' disciples had spent three years with him. They would have known Jesus intimately. So the resurrection must have been a drastic altering of his body. The gospel of Matthew tells us that when Jesus' body died on the cross, the bodies of saints were raised in their tombs, and then when Jesus' body was raised, the tombs of the saints were opened and the raised saints walked around the streets of Jerusalem. Jesus' resurrected body literally *broke open people's graves*. The dead were no longer dead! They were alive and walking around. Jesus was so overflowing with his own generous life that it simply could not be contained within his own body. Perhaps this is what made him unrecognizable.

And yet, even though Jesus' body was dramatically different, the text tells us that Jesus' body retained its wounds. The puncture wounds in his hands, feet and side remained with him even after his raised body was raising the saints from their graves. Doesn't this seem strange? Why would a body so full of glory retain the marks of its death? If Jesus can come back from the dead, why wouldn't he close up his wounds?

The text doesn't explicitly answer these questions, but some thinkers within the more mystical side of Christian tradition have thought a lot about Jesus wounds. They tend to think that Jesus kept his wounds for us, so that the wounds might become the openings through which we enter into and become Christ's body.

I spent last Memorial Day weekend in Chicago with group of young veterans who know a few things about bodies and wounds. In an effort to try to think about how to work through their experiences, they figured out a way to turn the fabric of their old military uniforms into recycled paper. I remember working with one vet, a print-maker, who had completed his last deployment a year prior. As we shook out one of his uniforms to begin our work, desert sand fell from its pockets dissolving the thin emotional bandage that protected us from his pain. After a long pause, he urged us onward and we began the work of carefully dismantling the clothes that had once given him both his identity and his deepest wounds. By the end of the weekend, his uniform had become a canvass made of the same material but now dramatically reordered, open to the possibilities of beauty.

Augustine tells us that wounds endured for the sake of Christ will shine like jewels in our resurrected bodies. This does not imply that all wounds are endured for the sake of Christ. But wounds acknowledged, wounds actually endured and not covered up with a band-aid, will become the sites of our greatest beauties. Our wounds are not like Christ's. They are not the means of our salvation. But they can be the first crack in the façade, the first glimpse of something in us other than the lie that has, for so long, prevented us from seeing Jesus. Just as Jesus' wounds are the openings through which we enter into Christ's body, our wounds can be the openings through which Christ enters us and begins to recast our vision and reorder our bodies. Our wounds can be the moments in which we begin to see the glory that is all around us, the moments in which the things that make Jesus unrecognizable to us begin to fall away.

His body was, in some ways, like ours. It was solid and limited. But on the cross, when Jesus' flesh collided with nails, thorns, and a sword, his body became more than the location of his own self. It became the place in which we also are given ourselves.

Jesus found a way to open up his body. Because of his resurrected wounds, we are enabled to enter into Christ, and in doing so, we enter into the very life of the Triune God. His solid body was opened and expanded so that his presence is no longer confined to ancient Galilean neighborhoods but instead extends into all nations and peoples.

So perhaps Jesus' wounds tell us something about what it means to live in the light of his resurrection. His wounds don't go away. Neither do ours. But as Easter people, our bodies, wounds and all, enter into Christ's body, and our wounds become the sites upon which our transformation begins. Like my veteran friend, Easter living demands the dismantling of one's entire life; it demands our death. But the risen Christ's body, the body so overflowing with life, is the place that makes that painful transformation possible.

On the first Sunday in Lent, Lauren Winner reminded us that Lent is a season that focuses us on the pruning and weeding of our souls. In this second Sunday after Easter, let us remember that Easter living does not usher in the end of difficult work. The weeding may be over, but we now begin the task of growing into something capable of bearing the weight of fruit. This is a task that just might take all that we have. But we begin this work knowing that the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead is now at work among us, ushering us into Christ's life-giving body and holding us there so that we too will one day receive in full the promises of the resurrection and life everlasting.

AMEN.