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Luke 24:36b-48
April 30, 2006

Easter is Everywhere

Easter morning was two weeks ago. It was a glorious morning. We had a grand procession with not one but two processional hymns accompanied by brass, tympani, and a choir numbering 150 plus. There were almost 2000 people packed into this building, many of them standing in the back or ringing the perimeter of our worship space. On such a festive morning, it was the easiest thing in the world to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead, that life reigns eternal over death, that the kingdom of God will have final say over the powers of this world. That was two weeks ago. I noticed when I woke up the day after Easter that the news reports out of Iraq had not changed much. Nor had the events of Durham over the past month and a half been resolved. A bright sunny morning and beautiful flowers help the images of resurrection more than the heavy rain we've had in the last two weeks. A senior, staring down her impending graduation, dropped by my office a couple of days after Easter and said, "Easter morning was great and all, but I sure wish the Risen Christ could find me a job." She said it through nervous laughter, but I sensed her understandable fear of the future, her doubts about what was going to happen to her after May 15.

Luke's gospel tells us what happens to the disciples on that first Easter day. Luke describes the second significant appearance of the Risen Christ in his account. Unlike in Mark's gospel, Jesus does not appear to the women at the empty tomb. Rather, he first appears later in the day, to two disciples on the road to Emmaus where they have a conversation with Jesus, thinking him a stranger in town, before recognizing him in the breaking of bread and the sharing of the afternoon meal. The two Emmaus road disciples go back to the others and tell them what happened. It is then, in the midst of their conversation about the Emmaus road events, that Jesus appears to all of them.

If you have ever doubted, or been troubled, or even been afraid of the events of Easter, you are in good company with the original disciples. Luke tells us Jesus appears in their midst, right in the middle of a conversation about his resurrection, and they are frightened and terrified. Even after he says to them, "Peace be with you," the first words out of his mouth, his disciples think they are seeing a ghost. A ghost. In other words, they think he is still dead. The disciples know that ghosts aren't alive. Ghosts are apparitions, visions, images of the dead. Ghosts say boo and clank around in dusty creaky closets and big stone churches. And most importantly, ghosts don't have bodies.

Sensing their fear and doubt, Jesus does the only thing he can do to show them who he is. "Look at my body," he says. Look where the Romans drove their nails through my flesh and blood. Look at the scars. Look at these hands, the hands that called you to follow me, the hands that healed the hurting, the hands that fed the 5000, the hands that broke the bread and passed the cup at the last supper, the hands that washed your feet two nights ago. Touch my hands. It is me. Ghosts do not have flesh and bones as I do. Easter is in Jesus' hands.

During the Easter season we as the church make a bold claim. We believe in the resurrection of the body. Easter is not a spiritual resurrection that hovers over and above the earthy, gritty, often messy and difficult life in the world. Easter is not merely about what happens when we die, and what it means to live forever in God. The resurrection of the body is a physical resurrection and Jesus comes to his disciples, not as a ghost, but with flesh, blood, sinew, bones, hands outstretched. Easter means that Jesus cares deeply about the intimate details of our daily, physical, bodily lives. Easter is not just in heaven. Easter is everywhere and Easter means that bodies matter. We don't believe in eternal souls that waft up to heaven like angelic clouds of mist. Jesus' body mattered to God, and our bodies matter to God, and everyone else's body matters to God.

On some level we are more than our bodies and those of a certain age understand this better than others. At times our bodies fail us. When I was a student I would get sick like clockwork the week after exams every December and every May. It was my body's way of taking its revenge, of saying "Please don't ever do that to me again." When Alzheimer's stalks a loved one, or a friend falls into a coma, deep down we know they are more than the body staring back at us with vacant eyes. When a loved one develops a disability and the doctors have no explanation, there may be some comfort in knowing that we are more than a mere body, more than just what others can see and touch. The most difficult trials of our lives often come when our bodies let us down, or break down, before we are ready; when the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. In those times, it may be soothing to know that we are also heart, mind, soul, passion, love, hopes, dreams, and a thousand other intangibles that help define who we are in all our beauty, brokenness, complexity and mystery, so that our body does not get the final vote. At those times, thank God, we are more than our bodies.

Yet even as we are more than our bodies our bodies are very much who we are. Our bodies are a gift of God. When God gave his greatest gift to the world, God came in the flesh of a baby. And when God raised Jesus on Easter morning, he raised him in his body. Heads, arms, torsos, brains, legs, hands, stomachs are all a testament to Easter, gifts to experience the goodness and joy of being alive and interacting with others. Our stomachs are special gifts indeed. God was very wise when he gave us our stomachs to experience life, as any five year-old or sixty-five year-old before a birthday cake can testify. In this story, the first thing Jesus says to the disciples after he shows them his hands, feet, and side, is "Do you have something to eat? How about some broiled Mahi-Mahi?" "Being dead makes one hungry, you know?"

Like Jesus' body, our bodies often tell the story of who we are and where we have come from. The scar from a fifth grade bicycle accident. The bashful tattoo from a particularly exciting night in college. The brown hair from your mother's side. The cleft chin from your father. The way you cry at weddings and sappy movies and laugh at Lucy and Snoopy. The meal when you suddenly discovered looking across the table that you were in love and life would never be the same. When we think of those we love, we often love them because of their quirky bodies. Their saunter across the quad, their goofy grin, the way their hair is always a bit too long or a little too short, the way they hug you really tight when you see them in the Great Hall. These are all gifts that come to us because we live embodied lives. We believe in the resurrection of the body. We believe that Easter is physical, and Easter is everywhere there are bodies.

Because we believe in the resurrection of the body, it matters how we treat our bodies, and God loves these bodies, no matter how flawed they might be. God created your body, wonderfully, lavishly, graciously and God loves your body. God treasures every nook and cranny of it. And that is why God grieves when your body is mistreated. That is why God grieves over every body, or anybody anywhere who does not get enough to eat, every body that is decayed by disease, every body tortured by drugs or alcohol, every body struggling with an eating disorder or anxiety. God grieves over every body wounded by violence, every body that is sexually abused, every body that is malnourished, and every body that is lonely and frightened. And God grieves over the suffering of his son and his pierced, bleeding body, and all of his son's sisters and brothers who know something of what it means to be crucified.

On Easter evening Jesus comes to his frightened, doubting disciples and bears his body to them, his hands, feet, and side. And then Jesus opens the scriptures to them. He reminds them of God's relationship to Israel through the creative and liberating stories of the Old Testament, the Law of Moses, the voice of the Prophets, the wisdom of the Psalms, and his own life, death, and resurrection. And then he does something very curious, he says to them, "Easter is up to you now. You disciples are the ones who will write the next chapter of my story. As I have given my hands and feet to you, so you must give your hands and feet to others. In your lives will my life will be revealed. You are my body now, the Body of Christ. You will bear witness to my love, desire, and concern for every body. You are to embody my life in the world, to take care of other people's bodies as I have taken care of yours. You are the ones who will carry on the ministry of my hands. You are the ones who will comfort those bodies that are sad and lonely. You are the ones who will feed the hungry and heal the sick. You are the ones who will reach out to those who don't believe they are worthy of love, the ones who have been abused and forgotten. You are the body of Christ, witnesses to the resurrection, conduits of Easter. Do not fear. Do not doubt. Wherever you are, there will be Easter.

When I graduated from divinity school, my mom gave me a clock made from the roof of the barn off my grandparents' Ohio farm where she grew up. Underneath the clock are the words of St. Teresa of Avila who lived in Spain during the 1500's. She writes, "Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which to look at Christ's compassion to the world. Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which he is to bless us now."

My friends . . . Easter . . . is in our hands.

Amen.