
A Living Body: A Sermon for Earth Day

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“You can see that I have a living body...” (Luke 24:39)

There is great reluctance in the church to talk about our bodies. Yes, we talk about the church as the body of Christ, but rarely do we talk about the “bodies” of Christ’s people.

Why is that?

Christianity as we know it today has been influenced by Hellenist culture, Platonism, Stoicism, and other factors. One result of these influences is what I call “hierarchical dualism.” By that I mean we have binaries or oppositional concepts where one thing is considered to have a higher status than the other. So, for instance, we might have—male/female; white/black; reason/emotion; gay/straight; mind/body. Ah, there it is, the mind is superior to the body! Even though we *know* that one aspect of the binary is not better than the other, we live as though it is. This is one of the reasons we are uncomfortable talking about our bodies—bodies that our Creator fashioned from the earth.

I celebrate that Luke’s third rendering of the risen Christ forces us to deal with the corporeality of the risen Christ. He appears as a body, not an ethereal presence. He is a human being, not an airy otherworldly manifestation. This Jesus is fleshy. He is made from the earth.

We see evidence of this in the text: Jesus says to the disciples, “Look at my hands and my feet. Touch me.” He offers his body as proof that he is alive. He even eats fish! He is an earthling like us. He is skin and bones; his body has wounds. In John’s Gospel, Jesus invites Thomas to actually touch his wounds; Jesus bids Thomas to put his hand inside the hole in his side—creating an intentional intimacy between two men. ***Both Luke and John teach us that the risen Christ is not to be separated from the historical Jesus.*** Today’s Gospel lesson talks about an embodied, resurrected Jesus who gives us permission to talk about bodies. We move against a hierarchical dualism that elevates the mind over the body. The body is spiritual; the body is good; the body is pleasing to God. The text opposes Augustine and his buddies!

In a sermon titled, “Matter Matters,” Barbara Lundblad talks about the pandemonium that followed the 1993 “Re-Imagining” Conference—an interfaith gathering of over 2000 clergy, laypeople, feminist, and womanist theologians and their allies (83 men attended) gathered to think and propose more expansive notions about theological categories—such as God, Jesus, creation, atonement—and the language used to speak about God. She observed

that the uproar surrounding this conference “bears witness to our fear of bringing bodily metaphors down to earth (and into worship!).”¹ Commentators found fault with a closing liturgy that used words celebrating bodies—women’s bodies. Sometime after the conference, Barbara reflected to herself saying, “Since November, I have asked myself the question: when do we ever hear words that affirm the body in liturgy? Do we ever thank and praise God for our physical, bodily selves? for arms that embrace, for muscle and bone? for our senses? for sexual pleasure? Is the body too disgusting? Must we transform bodies into metaphors?”²

Our reluctance to talk about bodies is made more complex by our inability to talk about race. Black and brown bodies have over the course of history and even presently have been subjected to abuse even by Christians. James Cone’s book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* brings theological reflection to the scandal of Christians using the lynching tree as a method to rid society of black and brown bodies. As Rome nailed Jesus’ body to a cross; so black and brown bodies were hung from a tree. It was a scandal that Christ was crucified and it is a scandal that black and brown bodies are still lynched by new methods—the use of guns.

As Jesus’ body stood among the disciples who were fearful and terrified, black and brown bodies stand among us and, like the disciples, we are fearful and terrified. Give guns to people who are fearful and terrified and we have a cataclysmic situation that we are witnesses to because of videotapes, Facebook, and Instagram. Just as the women and others stood at the cross in agony so do those related to black and brown bodies riddled with bullets agonize for their loved ones whose lives have been taken by those who pledge to protect. We all agonize.

The good news is that the embodied Christ who stood among the disciples that day comforted them; talked about their ancestor, Moses; opened up the scripture, and instructed them about next steps they were to take.

Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* has a scene where an elder stands before a community gathered in an open field in a forest. She talks about the beauty and wonder of their bodies urging them to love their bodies—bodies entrapped by hierarchical dualism. She comforts them, names the dangerous reality in which their bodies exist. She instructs them to love themselves regardless, saying:

In this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder

1. Barbara Lundblad, “Matter Matters,” as found at www.wbof-creation.org/worship/preaching/sermons. Accessed 3/5/2016.

2. Ibid.

“I am a living body,” the earth cries out—“love me.”

they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. *You* got to love it, *you!* . . . And O my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up.³

Jesus' plea to his disciples, “Look at me. I have a living body,” is the same plea that vulnerable subjects make—“Look at me, Look at me, look at me. . . . I have a living body.” Jesus in this scripture speaks for all vulnerable bodies. The elder in Morrison's novel urges a vulnerable people to “Love your bodies, love your bodies, love your hands and feet.”

This woman elder, like the resurrected Christ embodied in Jesus, speaks to a gathered community. As Jesus appeared, encouraged, and instructed the disciples, so, this elder appeared to speak life, encouragement, and boldness into her community.

On this Earth Day, we cannot overlook that, like black and brown bodies need to be acknowledged and loved, so does the earth. “I am a living body,” the earth cries out—“love me.” Lately there is much talk about climate change and global warming. It is no joke. There is evidence that climate change is taking place and is being accelerated because of human activity. The temperature of the earth is increasing; humans cause this to happen; everyone is affected, but there are things that we can do to make a difference. Here's an example:

Alan Rusbridger, editor in chief of the UK newspaper, “The Guardian,” is working with a team of writers to save the world from climate change. They claim that for twenty years journalism has failed to frame this as the biggest story in the world. It is unprecedented for a news agency to take on an advocacy role for any issue. One positive outcome of taking such a risk is that Neil Berkett, Guardian Media Group's chairman announced that the company that owns the Guardian would divest from fossil fuels.⁴

Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler announced that we should love the earth. He was a theologian before his time as he talked about ecology and faith. For Sittler, theology was to be at the center of a conversation about care for creation. He wrote,

By theology we mean not only a having but a doing—not

only an accumulated tradition, but a present task, which must be done on the playing field of each generation in actual life. One has a theology, to a greater or lesser extent, in order to do theology.⁵

Sittler's invitation to do theology is a call to us as the church to love the earth and all creation.

In like manner, Lundblad preached, “Bodies matter to God. Matter matters. . . . the Gospel to which we return again and again is a Word embodied. This Word is not a metaphor. Incarnation calls us into the heart of God, but the Word made flesh also blesses this earth as holy ground.”⁶

Listen! Can you hear the water gurgling in the baptismal font? Look! Soon the bread and wine will be set on the table. We are called as bodies to come to eat and drink the body and blood of Christ. These metaphors of faith become real as we come to the table mindful of the earth—God embodied in Jesus. The risen Christ stands among us saying, “I am a living body!” Amen.

3. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 103–104.

4. “The Guardian,” April 1, 2015.

5. Joseph Sittler, *Gravity and Grace: Reflections and Provocations* (Lutheran Voices Series) (Augsburg Books, 2004), 52.

6. “Matter Matters.”