

4th Sunday after Easter/Earth Day
Sermon 4.26.15
Scripture: Luke 24:36-48

A schoolteacher went walking in the Botanical Gardens of New York City one day. There she noticed two children, a boy around six years old and his younger sister, chasing each other across the grass. As they raced downhill, the boy tripped over a root and fell forward, sprawling to the ground. He got up slowly, and checked his elbows and knees for scrapes. Finding none, sensing not even the sting of a mild skinning, he smiled a sudden—and surprised!—smile. “It’s fun to fall on the grass,” he said, astonished. “It’s fun to fall on the grass!” And for the next ten minutes, this boy and his little sister played at falling—dashing across the grass and flinging themselves on it, sprinting across the grass and spilling themselves across it. The schoolteacher watched for a long time, feeling, at the sight of this drama, both enchanted and appalled. It was clearly a new experience for these children—to fall not on concrete but on grass.

I came across this story in the book, *Reclaiming the Body in Christian Spirituality*, edited by Thomas Ryan. And it struck me as funny that we should need such a book as this. Dipping into the slim collection, I was struck by how strange that such a concept would require a whole book, even if slim. How did Christianity come so to despise the body that love of it should need to be reclaimed? How did Christianity, this most incarnational religion, come so to turn against the body?

I ask this really for rhetorical effect. I’m not actually all that interested in how this came to be—or at least not this morning. What I am interested in is participating in a course-correction. I’d like us—along with Thomas Ryan and the other writers of this collection, and (if I may be so bold) Jesus himself—to get right with the Lord God who apparently doesn’t mind getting His hands dirty.

The passage we heard earlier is an apologetic text set to prove the physicality of Jesus’ resurrection. This is to say that this story is a response to the dualistic thinking that is both predominant and persistent—dualistic thinking that has us understand material things as corrupt while spiritual things are revered as pure and good. So it goes with such thinking that the body is bad and the spirit is good; so it goes that, after death, the spirit rises while the body falls away. The “immortality of the soul”: I bet you thought you this was a basic tenets of the Christian faith. But it’s not. This is a basic tenet of other religious and philosophical frameworks. The Resurrection of the body is a response to it.

As an aside, I think it’s cool that so much of modern science discredits the dualism of body and spirit. Consider how modern genetics would have us understand that we are determined as

much by the stuff of our bodies as by the cultivation of our minds. Consider how recent neurological imaging can illustrate how active a role our brains and body chemistry play in what ideas we conceive of and what emotions we feel. The soul and the body are intertwined with each other. Spirit and matter are a mysterious, tangled mess. Mind you, this isn't to say that science supports the resurrection of the body. But it is to say that it opens an interesting avenue into such exploration.

And yet, it's still a tough idea to bring home. We might assume that it did have a heyday. We might assume that the first followers of Christ—those earliest believers, less skeptical than we are, more credulous, even gullible—took to the resurrection of the body easily. Thomas Ryan, though, explains the philosophical milieu during the days of the early church well. “Authoritative circles among the Jews of the period did look for resurrection of the dead, but [for it] they looked to the end of the ages. At the same time the Sadducees rejected any such hope of what the future would hold. Above all, for those educated in the culture of the Hellenistic world, the idea of a dead man rising again appeared as a folly since they regarded the body as the tomb of the soul and looked forward to the liberation from it.” This is to say that, if there truly was a resurrection of the body—either at the end of one's life, or at the end of days—then this was hardly good news. The body, so went the thinking, was something to get away from.

Not so different now. In fact, you could argue that we in America have mastered this philosophy as well as anyone ever has. Our general un-wellness could be taken as testimony to this. Long lifespans notwithstanding, our general lack of health and vitality perhaps belies our deep suspicion that our bodies aren't worthy of us. Consider how we, as a whole society, either dismiss them in disdain or obsess over them, working them out, sculpting and waxing them to smooth perfection, dressing them up or radically modifying them. We either ignore our bodies, paying them little care, or we alter them in some weird belief they need correcting. Even American Christians have gone along. Did you know the average church-goer tends to be less healthy, less fit than the average American?

Our choices when it comes to the body in this culture seem to be this: pride or shame.

Incidentally, I think pride is the public face of shame.

I say this believing that in some deeply true way, our bodies are the location of our shame—and I don't mean just as regards body-image but as regards the very experience of being time-bound embodied beings. Ernest Kurtz has helped me come to this. Writer of the book *Shame and Guilt*, Mr. Kurtz makes this point that shame is the laying bare of “the essential paradox that inheres

in being human.” Moving past the considerations of whether we *should* feel ashamed or *shouldn't* feel ashamed, Mr. Kurtz simply claims that to be human is to know shame for “to be human is to be caught in a contradictory tension between the pull to the unlimited, the more-than-human, and the drag of the merely limited, the less-than-human.”

Remember last week, when we heard the story of the Garden and Adam and Eve and the Lord? The last thing the Lord did before sending Adam and Eve out—of the Garden, into the world—was to sew clothes for them. For their protection against the elements, or for their adornment against their nakedness which they experienced as shameful, we don't exactly. But what it implies to me is that the Lord recognizes the realm in which humans dwell—a little below the Lord, but apparently just a little, if of nature than of the sort of nature that a garden is, cultivated into a state of intended beauty and planned order.

Ironically, dwelling in this place makes us vulnerable to shame—mindful as we can be of God's perfection and of our having been made in God's image and for God's purpose, and yet also bound to the matters of this world and so limited by the matters of this world and, most pressingly, by the matters of our own bodies. For this tension, I think it's in body where we so often locate our shame. Here, we are perhaps most evidently not what we mean to be.

I think of myself as a good mother. I think of myself as a committed pastor. This week, while the boys were on school vacation, on more than one occasion I had to choose between these two things, which means on more than one occasion I wasn't what I meant to be.

There's a scene in the movie *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* that has Gilbert's mother meeting his new friend, a young woman, for the first time. His mother, obese to the point of housebound, hasn't been out in years. She also hasn't met anyone new in at least as long. She resisted the idea, and Gilbert resisted the idea, himself ashamed at how bad things with his mother had gotten. But his new friend persisted and prevailed and now, standing in his mother's bedroom while his mother sits heavily on her own bed, the girl holds our her hand to shake.

But Gilbert's mother can barely look up, certainly can't look this girl in the eye. At last she says, shamefully, “I haven't always been like this.”

The girl replies, “Well, I haven't always been like this.”

Here's a question: what *will* we always be like?

Biblical scholar Franz Mussner (according to Thomas Ryan) “urges that we radically transcend the notion that the resurrected body and the earthly body are the same. Compared to the body we have at death, our resurrected body is totally other. Through a process that is different

from anything we might call human experience, it is nevertheless one and the same person who undergoes and emerges from that process. Just as it was in the case of Christ, so it will be for us: the identity of the resurrected person is the same as that of the earthly person.” There’s a continuity there, though there is also something fundamentally different.

Notice, the disciples recognized Jesus, but they also recognized something utterly different about him. None suspected that the crucifixion had somehow been undone. None concluded that as Jesus had done for Lazarus, resuscitating him, someone had done for Jesus—now resuscitated and walking around. What they did suspect was that he was a ghost. They were wrong, of course, as Jesus pointed out: “...for a ghost doesn’t have flesh and blood, as you see that I have.” But they knew something was different; and something was the same.

There’s a lectionary-based podcast that I listen to. Four professors from Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota participate in a recorded discussion about the texts. This week, they came to much the same point as this. In thinking of the common questions people tend to ask about resurrection—Will Granma have Alzheimer’s disease still when she’s resurrected? Or, as a pop band wondered, “If your eye got poked out in this life, will it be waiting up in heaven with your wife?”—one of the professors went on at some length. The resurrected reality, he claimed, is fundamentally different from our known reality; and yet there’s a certain continuity. We will be fundamentally different—incorruptible, undying. Yet there will be a continuousness, too—flow.

What this continuity consists of is the person each of us is as held by God, as imagined and created and called by God. The continuity that we’ll experience between this life and the next will be in ourselves as the people we are in God, in the creation as it is imagined and perfected in the heart of God. God holds and confers our continuity. The promise that God has made to us, calling us by name, those identity markers: these are what persist.

Coming at it from a different angle now, this professor continues: “I always thought you form your identity and then you find groups to hang out with that are sort of like you. But research shows that you don’t discover your identity until you find groups. So, our identity is actually conferred. And at certain times of your life, times of transition (adolescence, moving away from home or moving around, getting married, becoming parents): these times are challenges as regards identity because the people who have conferred who you are aren’t there.”

And he makes a leap now, but I think it’s a logical one—that the continuity of identity that we bring from social setting to social setting is God, our identity as conferred by God. This is what Abraham discovered when he left his homeland and yet could say in response to God’s call

wherever it came, “Here I am.” And this is what we will discover at our own end when, on the other side of death, we can respond with familiarity—of ourselves, “Here I am,” and of those we know and love, “There you are.”

Finally, this professor goes on to say, that these fundamental yet conferred identity markers aren’t simply something to look forward to in eternity. Really, he goes on to encourage us to claim these divinely continuous characteristics with much greater power even now.

This is perhaps what preacher Peter Gomes was getting at when he said that of course he believed in eternal life after death, and that he even believed in eternal life before death.

Last Thursday was Earth Day, a day that (I imagine coincidentally) always falls around this Sunday during the season of Easter when Jesus shows up once again—to walk the earth, to talk to his friends, and even to grab something to eat. Our denial of the holy, beloved fleshliness of our being works hand-in-glove with a certain denigration of the our whole earthly environment—and this, as we well know, has wreaked devastation worldwide. Our prideful shame (our shameful pride) at being embodied spirits (at being animated flesh) has us in a frenzied, destructive state.

James Hall contributed the essay to this effect in the book I mentioned earlier. He wrote, “At its root the Christian faith is an embodied faith,” and he reminds us that from the earliest chapters of the book of Genesis “...the Hebrew word for man is *adam*, hence the name Adam; and the Hebrew word for ground, dust, dirt, is *adamah*, that of which *adam* is made.” This is to indicate that there is a deep and intrinsic connection here, and so it would follow that, just as we’ve become “alienated from our own bodies,” as Hall claims we have—so much so that we don’t even recognize when we’re harming them, by neglect or by indulgence—likewise, we’ve become “alienated from the earth around us,” indeed so much so that there are some among us who are denied the privilege of knowing that it’s fun to fall on grass.

Huh, the world speaks of matters of faith: Christianity is a faith of matter.

The interconnectedness of the earth and humanity is another concept to recover in the Christian faith, another concept that I’m flummoxed as to how it ever fell away. We ascribe it to new age thinkers and Native American chiefs. But it’s right there in our scriptures, too—like a dot-to-dot whose connections are awaiting our recognition of them. They’re not exactly one and the same, but they certainly are intimately related.

And these days one aspect of their relatedness is the way by which both the life of *adam* and the life of *adamah* has suffered terrible harm, grievous harm. It all has Mr. Hall wondering, quite urgently, what it might look like “to recover a faith that includes and celebrates not only the human

body but also the earth's body." Indeed, he declares this as our crucial task—to rediscover our place in the created order, to return home.

For what it's worth, I believe it is happening—and none too soon, though I think also not too late. Call me a fool: that's what I think. The fact that, what was once a fringe element of society (tree-huggers!), and then a special interest group (environmentalists), is now a body of concern that so many people have joined: this is a sign of a sea-change, and this of a good sort.

Of course, as with so many historical tides, we might largely ride these things out. But as Christians, as followers of the incarnate and resurrected Christ, we also have a wonderful call to paddle in history's direction—this grand arc that is bending toward justice—justice for all creation—and bringing us home.

With hope, we paddle. In joy, we ride.

Thanks be to God.