
When the Body Becomes the Site of Redemption

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Cathy Zappa
The Second Sunday of Easter – Year A

Over my desk at home, I have a hand-tinted picture of my grandfather, who died sixteen years ago at the ripe young of eighty-nine. It is one those old, slightly fuzzy crosses between a portrait and a photograph, with the image smoothed over and its sharp edges softened. His face is in profile: you see the smooth, perfect skin of a nine-year-old boy with thick, reddish hair and a faint pink blush in his left cheek.

What you don't see from this angle is the dark purple splotch--the birth mark--that stretched across the right side of his face and so was so much a part of him. It is erased, missing, in the image. There is a lot more that you can't see in the picture, of course--so much that life would write on his face in the seven decades to come: his father's early death; his marriage to my beautiful, smart, feisty, complicated grandmother; and his devoted care for her when Alzheimer's set in. What you don't see is how he would gather our extended family together for meals that, apart from the impressive dessert table, we grandchildren found tedious and so, so, so long. So long that we fled under the table to play. And our parents let us! That tells you how long those meals were. What you don't see is how my grandfather *loved* genealogy and was excited to pass down to us the family stories he dug up, while our eyes glazed over in disinterest. And what you don't see is my regret about that now.

How I wish I could try again. How I wish I could see him again, and say thank you. Maybe I will. I believe in the resurrection, after all! But I'm not looking for an easy-way-out resurrection. I've got little interest in a new life that replaces the old. I want the whole shebang, the whole person, the whole face that I knew. I'm holding out for the resurrection we are promised on Easter and in today's Gospel: resurrection that is so powerful and mysterious that it doesn't need to erase or forget anything, but can redeem everything. Resurrection that takes *all* our sorrows and losses and regrets and transforms them. Includes and integrates them. And breathes life into them.

I'm convinced that that's what Thomas was holding out for too. When Jesus appeared to the other disciples and showed them his hands and side, Thomas wasn't with them. And he wanted to see this risen Christ himself. He needed to know that this is the same Jesus he had seen wounded, crucified, and buried. The same Jesus he and the other disciples had abandoned. The same Jesus he had misunderstood and let down, and whose forgiveness he longed for.

Like anyone who has lost a loved one, Thomas wasn't content with a second-hand report, or a doctrine or a dream, or a lovely idea, or good feeling, or powerful memory of Jesus. Thomas wanted the Jesus he had known in a particular way. And that is who comes to him: the Jesus he knew and loved, crucified and risen.

"My Lord, and my God," Thomas utters, in wonder. Sheer wonder. Because it's all so impossible. Because this is something completely new. It is both spirit and body, divine and human, living and dead and resurrected, all at once. It is ordinary: Christ still bears hard-to-look-at wounds, and he eats, and drinks, and talks like he used to. And it is extraordinary, because, well, he died, and now he's risen, and he's breathing the Holy Spirit on his disciples, as God breathed life into Adam at the very beginning.

In the beginning, the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And that same Word became flesh and dwelled among us. That's how the gospel begins, and that's how it ends: with the eternal Word becoming flesh. The story of the resurrection is the story of the incarnation: it is the story of God's love, God's very self, becoming embodied in this world, in these flesh-and-blood bodies, in our corporate bodies of family and

community and humankind, in the body of this earth, and most of all, in the body of Christ.

In Jesus Christ, in his birth and life and death *and* resurrection, the body becomes the site of redemption. That is a phrase I picked up from Lynn Casteel Harper's book, *On Vanishing*, about "mortality, dementia, and what it means to disappear": "when the body becomes the site of redemption."^[i] When the body becomes the site of redemption, redemption is not about escaping the body (neither this individual nor our corporate bodies, as messy as they can be) into the pristine, separate, and superior realm of the mind. The mind isn't separate from the body anyway! Our bodies aren't separate, isolated, individual entities either. Redemption, meaning, memory: they reside in the body, too, and do not depend on the ability of our mind to grasp them.

It is Jesus Christ's body, that is, his flesh and blood and mind, his relationships, his words and deeds and their impact: it is his body that becomes the place of resurrection. It is his body that becomes the locus of a new, mysterious unity--of reconciliation between heaven and earth, the embodied and the eternal, the mind and body and spirit. Between my body and yours. Offenders and victims. The living and the dead.

That changes everything! That changes how we see and approach and care for the body: our own bodies. Other people's bodies. Bodies that can't speak for themselves. Dead and dying bodies. The body of the earth and the bodies of all its creatures. The body of Christ, that is the Church, and the sacrament, and this gathering. It changes how we relate to matter and the material world: no longer as a limited resource we use against one another, but as a gift, and "a means of communion."^[ii] Bread and wine, ordinary people and relationships, become a means of holy communion.

We have been reborn in the fellowship of Christ's body, as we prayed in our opening collect. Grant, O Lord, that we may show forth in our lives—in our bodies—what we profess by our faith.

And Granddaddy, thank you!

^[i] Lynn Casteel Harper, *On Vanishing: Mortality, Dementia, and What It Means to Disappear* (Catapult, 2020), 172. Harper writes, "When the body becomes the site of redemption, and the mind does not escape the body, a certain unity can abide."

^[ii] Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (Pilgrim Press, 2003), 104.