

Happy First Week of Easter! This was my first Holy Week working in an Episcopal Church, and we had *so many services*. So many fleshy, sensory services. Throughout the week, we followed in the footsteps of Jesus and the disciples, waving palms, smelling incense, cooking supper, even washing each other's feet, and walking the stations of the cross. In this way, we actually spent the week quoting scripture with our bodies.¹

This week's text invites us to consider how we can quote the resurrection in our bodies. We are invited to think about what Jesus' resurrection has to do with these sticky, soft, aching bodies in which we find ourselves.

Last week's reading from Matthew, as Peter pointed out, was full of quick rhetorical pivots: *immediately, suddenly, quickly, breathless* turns from scene to scene. Today's account from John breathes a bit more. It is a steady, intimate passage, with gaps, cracks in the surface that allow it some air.

First, Jesus *breathes* the Holy Spirit onto his fearful friends, equipping them to go into the world confident that God will be with them as they serve others and make important decisions. This breath, by the way, echoes the life's breath that God breathes into humans in the Genesis creation story, where humans are made of the earth's clay.

After receiving the Spirit, the disciples encounter Thomas – who doubts their testimony. *Suddenly*: eight days pass. Jesus appears to his friends again, and this time Thomas is with them. There is a wetness to their encounter: bodies and fluids, breath and open wounds. This is captured beautifully in Caravaggio's "The Incredulity of Thomas," which appears on the front of your bulletins. Jesus gingerly takes Thomas' finger, and guides it into his own wound. All are transfixed. Transgender theologians have connected with this image, pointing out that in his risen body Jesus bears marks not unlike the chest scars from top surgery.²

The church has tended to treat Thomas like Judas: assigning blame to him for his doubt. I've heard others point out that Thomas' demand for evidence is an example of early empiricism: if you make a claim, show me some receipts. Personally, I hear in his insistence to touch Jesus a commitment to body-centered-ness. In

his skepticism, Thomas yokes his faith to the human body in much the same way we try to do during Holy Week. It's all well and good to tell me about a resurrection – but show me what this means in a body, quoted in fluid, flesh, and blood.

Our relationship with flesh and blood has, for us Christians, long been a source of struggle and confusion. On Carnival Sunday, the Sunday before Lent, we took time to celebrate the delight and joy of our bodies, in light of this troubled history. The early church found itself battling a spirituality called Gnosticism, which said that the physical world was illusory, decaying, and useless, and that secret knowledge and eternal souls deserved our attention over these vessels of trash. The biblical text itself bristles with this pull between recognizing the holiness of the body, and condemning the flesh as hopelessly corrupt. "Who can save me from this body of death?" Paul asks in Romans.

Our discomfort with embodiment has trickled down through the church for centuries, often surfacing with outright animosity. We haven't loved our bodies, and we certainly haven't loved others'. In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, self-anointed preacher Baby Suggs tells her congregation, recently freed from slavery, to love their hands, mouths, eyes, and feet. "Yonder they do not love your flesh," she says. "They despise it."

Indeed, the bodies of the "Other" – the black body, the disabled body, the colonized body, the female body, and the nonbinary body – have long been despised targets of Christianized violence. The bodies of people with disabilities are only recently tolerated in our society. Historically, those with physical and mental disabilities have been poked, prodded, and distrusted – exposed to eugenic slaughter, forced sterilizations, warehoused in cruel institutions. Even today, people with mental and physical disabilities are disproportionately killed by police, hired less, seen as dependent occasions for inspiration, charity, or pity, rather than as active agents, experts in their own needs.

Disability theologians, reflecting on this legacy of dehumanizing treatment, have called for a theology that "stares back."³ They observe that there is nothing inherently wrong with their bodies – but that it is our society – a society made for only certain kinds of people – that is broken. "Why are you trying to fix what is not

¹ Dan Puchalla, "What is Stations of the Cross?"

² Shay Kearns, *Walking Toward Resurrection*.

³ Sharon Betcher, "Spirit and the Politics of Disablement."

broken?" they ask. "Why do you look for the dead among the living?"

In the risen Lord's encounter with Thomas, Jesus' raised body still bears open wounds in his hands, sides, and feet. As disability theologian Nancy Eiesland observes, "In presenting his impaired body to his startled friends, the resurrected Jesus is revealed as the disabled God."

Ideas of a disability-free afterlife can suggest to people with disabilities that a crucial part of their identity will need to be erased, or "fixed" in order to be accepted by God.⁴ And yet Jesus' resurrected body is evidence that participation in the fullness of new life in God is possible with all our physical impairments fully present. His wounds are marks of solidarity with all disabled and wounded bodies.

I visited the Smart Museum this week, where I learned a bit about the Japanese art of *kintsugi*, or "golden joinery." *Kintsugi* is a unique, ancient method of ceramic repair performed by very patient master artists. After a bowl or cup shatters, it's not thrown away. Rather, the broken item is carefully pieced back together, bit by bit, as the cracks are infused with powdered gold.

If you've ever seen the orange glow of lava at night, that's how the lining of *kintsugi* looks – every crack is imbued with burning amber, lightning across a smooth surface. The philosophy behind *kintsugi* is that shattered things have not lost their value. Breaks in an object don't need to be hidden, but are highlighted as an important part of its history. The scandal of *kintsugi* is that the repaired works are sometimes said to be more beautiful than the supposedly "perfect" originals.

As one pottery scholar observes, "The vicissitudes of existence over time, to which all humans are susceptible, could not be clearer than in the breaks, the knocks, and the shattering to which ceramic ware too is subject."⁵ We too, vessels made of clay that God breathed into, damage easily. No matter how much we may try to insulate ourselves, or our children, from pain, most of us have experienced these routine fractures: broken relationships, shattered expectations – frayed nerves, eroded hopes and dreams.

Think back with me to Thomas' face to face meeting with Jesus. Jesus body isn't spirited away into unrecognizable perfection – it is only by his injuries that Thomas is able to recognize him and say "My Lord, and My God." Jesus' wounds are a crucial part of his identity.

So too, do our unique scars identify us as *us*. I was talking to a friend about this passage this week and she told me, "I don't relish in the suffering I have experienced. But I got through it. It's a part of my story. And I wouldn't be me without it." I don't think God breaks us to make us more beautiful. But I do know that "our very survival depends upon how we come to terms with our pain."⁶ I know that our wounds are living testaments to our history, and that God is making resurrection life fully known in the midst of what we may see as imperfections.

Jesus and Thomas' exchange closes with one final *crack*: a *breaking* of the fourth wall with a turn to us, the readers. Jesus says "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet still believe!" That's us: we have not seen and we believe.

Some things cannot be seen – but that doesn't mean they're not real. Often, people with invisible illnesses and disabilities are not believed when they try to explain what they're going through. Their testimonies are doubted; their wounds are probed. One trans friend wrote to me this week, reflecting on this passage, and said, "people don't believe that I am who I say I am because I don't have any 'physical proof.'"

"Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet still believe!" What a splendid reminder that our faith is not dependent on physical sight – nor, for that matter, on any other kind of ability status or bodily perfection. God breathes life and courage into each of us, gifting us a faith that is inexhaustibly yoked to our bodies.

Will you pray with me?

God, we thank you for these bodies you have made, in which we live and work and play each day. Wrinkled or smooth, soft or strong, easily sunburned or sun-resilient – we know our bodies are vehicles of your glory. We thank you for your resurrection, and for your scars. For is with our wounds fully present that we participate in Jesus' risen life. Amen.

⁴ Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God*.

⁵ Christy Bartlett, "A Tearoom View of Mended Ceramics."

⁶ Rita Nakashima Brock, "Journeys By Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power"
