In 1993 and 1996, two studies were undertaken to explore how humans experience pain. In the first, participants were subjected to two versions of the same unpleasant experience. First, the group submerged one of their hands in cold water for 60 seconds. Later, the same people were asked to do this again, and then told to keep their hand in for an additional 30 seconds, during which time the temperature was raised one degree. Subjects were then offered an option: which trial would you like to repeat? Surprisingly, participants were much more willing to repeat the second trial. The researchers, among them Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman, concluded that participants preferred the memory of the second experience to the first.

The 1996 study tracked colonoscopy patients, exploring if there was a difference between how much pain they experienced during the procedure and how much pain they thought they experienced after the fact. One patient’s colonoscopy lasted eight minutes; the other’s, twenty-four. During the exam, each patient reported levels of discomfort as they experienced it. The two patients had similar peak intensities of pain. However, the end of the procedure for the first patient was extremely painful, whereas the end for the second patient – whose overall procedure was sixteen minutes longer – was relatively painless. Based on the reports from the patients’ during the exam, the second patient had a much worse time of it: a longer procedure with more pain overall. Incredibly though, when the patients were later asked to rate how painful they found their colonoscopy, the first patient reported a much worse experience than the latter.

After many iterations of this, researchers found that people consistently evaluate the discomfort of an experience not based on an overall average or cumulative sum, or even with much regard for duration, but based solely on the intensity of pain at the worst (peak) and final (end) moments. This has become known as the peak-end rule and has given rise to the notion that we have, in fact, two very different brains with two very different priorities: an experiencing brain, and a remembering brain. We tend to think of ourselves as objectively recording our lives in our memory, as though we walk through each day with a mental iPhone camera set perpetually to “on,” and can review these videos on demand at any time. But this appears not to be the case. Think, for example, of vacations. Most people hope to cram as much excitement and
adventure as possible into a much-anticipated trip, but will probably remember the overall experience not based on how every day went or how much fun they had overall, but on the most pleasant or unusual time and how they felt about it all on the last day.

This idea of a remembering brain and an experiencing brain is illuminating when we read the accounts of Jesus’ resurrection in the four Gospels. In Mark’s, the earliest, the women come to the tomb and encounter a young man who tells them Jesus has been raised and will meet them in Galilee. Luke and Matthew’s Gospels, which come a few decades after Mark’s, include several stories of the disciples actually seeing the risen Christ: eating with him, talking with him, touching him. And John’s, written a few more decades later, has many more stories of such encounters.

Today’s passage from Luke recounts the second resurrection appearance in that Gospel. Just after Jesus appears to two of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, and they return to tell the others about this incredible experience, he suddenly appears among them and says, “Peace be with you.” They were terrified, thinking he was a ghost – an apparition, a spirit, a vision, but still an encounter with someone who was very much dead – when Jesus directs their attention to his body. “Look at my hands and my feet,” he says. These hands that just days ago fed you. Washed your feet. These hands that healed so many. These feet that have carried us from Galilee to Jerusalem, from obscurity to infamy. “See that it is I myself. Touch me and see,” he insists.

Now contrast this with last week’s Gospel from John, where Jesus appears among his disciples in a locked room. There he also says, “Peace be with you” and shows them the wounds on his body. But in John’s account Jesus’ then breathes the Spirit upon his friends. In today’s Gospel, there’s no mention of the Spirit. The passage ends with a promise that it will come, but first Jesus has to ascend to heaven, and the disciples get their act together, and only fifty days from Easter will the spirit descend like tongues of fire upon them. This is the passage we will read from Acts, written by the same author as Luke, when we celebrate Pentecost a few weeks from now on May 20th. But we’ve still got, you know, weeks to go ‘til then.

As inheritors of the Anglican tradition, Episcopalians are not Biblical literalists, and we don’t worry too much about fitting the four Gospel accounts together perfectly. At least we don’t stress over incongruities and inconsistencies, figuring the four authors are a bit like adult siblings who get together at Thanksgiving and start telling stories from their childhoods, only to realize
they all but grew up in different households for the radically divergent tales they tell. There’s a
common cast of characters but diverse, and differently ordered, chapters.

Nevertheless, we do believe the four authors are telling a story about a common past
which involved real people, real communities, real historical events. So it helps me to think
Mark, Luke and Matthew – the earlier texts – may be telling the story of Jesus’ life and the lives
of his disciples as they experienced it, whereas John is telling the story as the community
remembers it. In John, key moments – like Easter and Pentecost – are compressed. And the peak
of pain – the cross – and the end of pain – the resurrection – are much expanded, because, after
all, they made the biggest impressions. They are the lens through which the whole rest of the
story is remembered. John’s Gospel itself actually shows some awareness of this, with a
repeating pattern that goes like this: Jesus does something; the disciples completely fail to
understand what is happening; and then the narrator lets us know that after he was raised the
disciples remembered the event and it all made sense.

Given that our experiencing brains and our remembering brains have such different
interests and priorities, the points of overlap in the four Gospels are all the more important. And
in Eastertide, it is hard to avoid this one: all of the Gospel’s insist that Jesus’ body was raised in
the resurrection. Mark makes this case by highlighting the fact that the tomb is empty - there is
no body there - whereas the others have these stories about the risen Jesus himself. There are a
lot of ways of thinking about the bodily resurrection and why it would matter, but it seems the
most compelling take away is simply that bodies matter to God. Jesus wasn’t raised a ghost, a
spirit, a sanctified soul, but flesh and blood, bone and sinew, wounded and whole. Jesus’ body
mattered to God, and our bodies matter to God, too.

After all, in God’s most generous act of self-giving love, God came among us in the
flesh, the word incarnate, and lived a full and complicated human life, and died a full and terrible
human death, and even at the end, to show just how powerful the divine love that brought him
into the world in the first place really was, God doesn’t leave Jesus’ body behind in the
resurrection. Jesus’ body mattered to God, and our bodies matter to God, too. God isn’t only
concerned with the state of our minds, our hearts, our souls, but also our flesh and blood, bone
and sinew, breath and being.

We live in such a radically disembodied culture that this is worth saying again and again
and again. It is worth our remembering, which we do week after week when we gather here for
worship, engaging our bodies in standing and sitting, singing and speaking, eating and drinking, remembering Jesus around that table as God remembers him in us. Jesus’ body mattered to God. And our bodies matter to God. Which means that God is grieved and saddened when our bodies are mistreated or abused. God feels, keenly, the strain of a body exhausted by business and stress, a body wounded by violence or violation, a body weakened by age and disease, a body wearied by addiction or mental illness. God also feels, keenly, the moments of rest and refreshment, delight and pleasure, restoration and integration that ground us here and now in God’s glorious creation, deepen our relationships, and strengthen our connection to the holy. We are more than our bodies, for sure, but we are also our bodies. And this matters not only because God is known to us in and through our bodies, but also because we don’t get to leave our bodies and our neighbor’s bodies behind, either.

From time to time my husband and I watch an HBO series called VICE. It features two in-depth journalistic reports on contemporary issues in a thirty-minute show. We appreciate the reporting but have to take it in small doses, like strong medicine, because the show always leaves us feeling pretty distressed about the state of the world. One of the recent episodes we watched was on human trafficking, and concluded with a look at some of the recovery centers for children caught up in this insidious, widespread, and truly evil trade. The sheer scale – 1.2 million children a year are trafficked around the world – is devastating. Another episode explored the fate of the Cubs of the Caliphate, the children who were indoctrinated and trained as soldiers by ISIS. Their stories are heartbreaking, and the likelihood of them ever knowing a remotely normal life – some only five or six years old - are slim.

I found myself so saddened by those shows, wanting to turn away, pretend these are far away problems and faraway people … but as a member of the body of Christ, I don’t really have that option. God cares about our bodies. Which means God cares about all bodies. And even when circumstances seem so utterly hopeless and impossible – when the body has been in tomb for three whole days, an immense stone rolled across the front; or when people are starving; children are manipulated; wars are raging - well, the stories of the resurrection say this is when God will do God’s best work.

There is a wonderful quote from Saint Teresa of Avila, a sixteenth century mystic and saint, especially fitting around Easter: “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.” If we are distressed by the suffering, pain, illness, grief, trauma,
and heartache of others, or the suffering, pain, illness, grief, trauma and heartache in ourselves,
then the bodily resurrection is a great reason to move toward those places of hurt and need and
loss, not away. Because God will find a way to use our bodies – wounded and wild, bearing the
scars and stories of our life - to breathe new life into our world. Indeed, it is through our hands
now, outstretched with a mind-blowingly generous love that is only partially our own, that the
risen Christ continues to say, “Peace be with you,” and sticks around long enough to make sure it
is so. This is a truth worth experiencing. This is a truth worth remembering. **Amen.**