

# Honouring Disfigured Flesh

*A sermon on Luke 24: 36b-48 by Nathan Nettleton, 14 April 2024*

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## Message

The physicality of the resurrection is a mystery that assures us that God values and honours us as whole, embodied humans, even if our bodies are damaged or worn out.

## Sermon

One of the reasons I tend to shy away from the labels “liberal” or “progressive” to describe my Christian faith, is that those positions are very often associated with not believing in things like the physical bodily resurrection of Jesus, and I do believe in the physical bodily resurrection of Jesus. I can’t prove it; I can’t explain it; but I do believe in it. Whereas often those who proclaim themselves to be liberal or progressive Christians argue that the resurrection was a purely spiritual event, and that the body remained lost in a tomb somewhere, or even that the resurrection is just a metaphor for the way that Jesus’s love and influence live on in our hearts and in our churches.

I’m certainly not here to condemn or criticise such beliefs. Maybe they are even right, and if they are one day somehow proved right, it won’t be the end of my faith. But the physical bodily nature of the resurrection seems quite important to me, too important not to be true.

At risk of being misunderstood, I might even say that I need it to be true. That’s a risk, because those of us who believe in it are sometimes criticised for needing it as a kind of crutch to prop up our faith. I don’t think it is propping up my faith, especially since it can’t be proved, and if I had to live without it, I could, but there are still parts of me which at some level need it to be true. And I think the level at which I need it to be true is the level of my own physical body. My physical body needs the physical body of the risen Jesus to be real and true.

Questions about the nature of the resurrection, physical or not, are far from new. They have been asked right from the beginning, and the range of views have probably existed among the followers of Jesus within the Church right from the beginning, so to be clear, it is not a matter that determines whether someone is a Christian or not. We all accept that whatever the resurrection was, it is a mystery beyond our comprehension, so followers of Jesus can be all over the shop in their beliefs and feelings about this. I’m still going to explain here why the physical bodily nature of the resurrection matters to me, but I don’t need you to agree with me and I’m not criticising you if you don’t.

One of the reasons I accept that it doesn’t matter that much and that followers of Jesus can hold different views on this is that none of us now get to experience the resurrection of Jesus as a physical bodily reality, even if that’s what it was. Christian faith is about who we follow and how, not about the details of what we believe to have happened in the past.

The Apostle Paul claims that the risen Jesus appeared to more than five hundred of his followers between his resurrection and his ascension, so those five hundred were the last and only people to have encountered the physical reality of the resurrection, whatever it was. And probably most of those five hundred didn’t actually touch him, as he invites some of his followers to do in both tonight’s gospel reading and last week’s.

The rest of us, ever since then, have had to do without that experience, and last Sunday we heard Jesus speaking of exactly that when he said to the Apostle Thomas, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

However, in both gospel accounts, tonight’s and last week’s, the writers are directly addressing the question of whether the resurrected Jesus had a physical body, and both are answering with a clear yes. They are even saying that the physical body of the risen Jesus is the same body that he had when he was crucified. “Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see.”

We don’t usually look at people’s hands and feet to identify them. We look at faces. There are very few of you who I could identify from a line-up of hands and feet. The obvious point of looking at his hands and feet was to see the raw wounds that would establish beyond doubt that this was in fact the very body that had been brutally crucified just a few days ago.

Now this may raise a question in your minds, a question that is slightly different from the one the gospel writer addresses. The gospel writer, Luke, directly addresses the question of whether the risen Jesus could be a ghost. “Touch me and see,” says Jesus, “for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have,” and then he asks them for something to eat and eats it in their presence. It was widely believed that ghosts could not eat because they had no physical body for the physical food to disappear into. If a ghost attempted to eat, the food would just fall through them.

But nowadays the horror genre has given us another category of living dead that is perhaps coming to mind for you. Could Jesus be a zombie? The difference between ghosts and zombies is that zombies do have physical bodies. They are dead bodies that are somehow animated, and they still bear their unhealed physical wounds, just as Jesus does. Could the risen Jesus be a zombie?

As Jesus’s unhealed wounds attest, he certainly has something in common with zombies, because his body has been killed and yet somehow is back on its feet and moving around. It really screws with our minds, but Jesus is simultaneously dead and alive. Nevertheless Jesus is not a zombie because he is simultaneously dead and alive in a way that is completely different from zombies. With zombies, which by the way I am not claiming to be anything more than fictional or mythical; with zombies the combination of being dead and alive is primarily about being dead. An encounter with a zombie is unmistakably an encounter with death, death somehow animated but overwhelmingly and horrifyingly dead nevertheless.

But the encounter with the risen Jesus is overwhelmingly about life. Certainly his body still bears the clear marks of death, but it is death rendered powerless and irrelevant by the overwhelming presence and force of life – exuberant, unquenchable, contagious life. Jesus is, if you like, the exact opposite of a zombie, and the reason we don’t have a category to describe this opposite is that Jesus is the only person ever to have inhabited this category. His resurrection is historically unique. We will all share in it, but so far Jesus is the only one who has.

So, getting away from the silliness of zombie speculation and the like, why do I personally find it so important to believe and continue to think of the resurrection of Jesus as physical bodily thing? If we can't experience it as such, why would it matter enough for me to bother preaching about it this evening? Let me unpack a few reasons.

One reason is that even before the death and resurrection of Jesus, his physical body was really important. What we call the incarnation – the presence of God in human flesh, in a human body – is one of the things that most sets Christianity apart from many other religions. And far too often we've seen Christians downplaying this and trying to turn Christianity into one of those religions that has a really negative view of human bodies. We get this really negative binary where “the spiritual” is good and all that really matters, and “the body” is bad, and to be looked down on.

The Judaeo-Christian tradition at its best has not got sucked into this. We hold that God made our bodies and declared them to be good, and that how we treat our bodies and how we behave in and through our bodies is inseparable from faithful spirituality. We do not see bodily actions and bodily pleasures like eating and drinking and making love as suspect for being physical and bodily. Ours is a body-positive religion.

And I think that because that is always under threat from those who are suspicious of anything bodily, and who would rather have some kind of pure spirituality that gets away from our bodies, God continues to commit to incarnation, to embodiment. I think that if God had raised Jesus from the dead in a way that didn't involve his physical body, that would have played into the hands of those who dislike bodies and want to keep them out of our faith.

So for that reason, it seems to me to be thoroughly consistent with the ways of God that God would not just raise Jesus as some kind of disembodied spirit, but body and all. God is not giving encouragement to body-hating or body-ignoring spiritualities.

A second reason is closely related to the first, and flows from it. God doesn't just commit to human bodies; God commits to the material world, the world God created and declared to be good. Those spiritualities which despise or disregard the human body often don't stop there. Seeing true value only in the spiritual and immaterial, they can end up despising or disregarding all physical material things, and ultimately the whole material world.

Many of the most shameful episodes in the history of the Christian Church have had roots in getting sucked into this negative body-denying way of thinking.

Oppressive colonialism has often been aided and abetted by overly spiritualised religion that said that it didn't matter what happened to people in the here and now, or how you treated them, because it was only some disembodied spiritual life in heaven that mattered.

The widespread sexual abuse of children in the Church and its systematic cover-up has also been tied to such negative views of the body that perpetrators were unable to develop mature healthy sexuality and unable to comprehend and empathise with the suffering caused in and through their bodily actions.

And when the Church has been complicit in environmental destruction and degradation of the earth, this too has followed on from a failure to honour the material world and to

recognise that God is bodily present in the physical world. Sometimes, a distorted version of our witness to the real presence of Christ in the bread and wine at the Lord's Table has seen that not as the tip of the iceberg but as the limit and extent of God's involvement with the material world.

So again, it seems to me to be consistent with God's valuing of the physical material world that God would not just raise Jesus as some kind of disembodied spirit, but in a whole physical material way. God is not giving encouragement to spiritualities that devalue and abuse the earth and its creatures.

Finally, I think there are some really important things being communicated to us by Jesus when he shows us the wounds in his body, and that would be nothing but illusion or play-acting if his resurrection didn't involve his real body.

Many of us have bodies that are scarred or disabled or disfigured or just wearing out, and we live in a world that too often despises such bodies. The cult of the social media selfie urges us to air-brush out our physical imperfections and present a digitally altered view of our imagined perfect selves, blemish free and scar free. That fosters a culture of devaluing everyone whose bodies can't measure up to these imaginary standards of perfection.

The theological version of this portrays the goal of Christian growth as a return to the imagined perfection of the Garden of Eden, and that's a theology that excludes those whose damaged or worn out bodies are not going to cooperate with such an agenda. But the resurrection of the wounded Christ gives the lie to such damaging theologies. Jesus's risen body is not restored to some Garden of Eden state of perfection. It is permanently wounded and scarred and disabled. And it is with wounded hands that Jesus invites all of us with our damaged and deteriorating bodies to follow him into resurrection life and love.

So again, it seems to me to be consistent with God's willingness to embrace and honour the woundedness of the world and its creatures that God would not just raise Jesus as some kind of disembodied spirit, but as a wounded and scarred physical body. God is not giving encouragement to spiritualities that exclude those who are broken or disabled or succumbing to the ravages of age.

While we followers of Jesus were still hidden away in an upstairs room with all our confusion and grief and fear, Jesus himself stood among us and said, "Peace be with you." We were startled and terrified, and thought that we were seeing a ghost, a disembodied spirit, a spiritual phantasm unconnected to our physical world. But Jesus said to us, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself, wounded and killed, but fully alive and here for you. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have. And fill your lungs with my breath of overwhelming aliveness, for a zombie does not exude life, love, and more life as you can feel I do."

And when he had said this, he showed us his hands and his feet, and breathed glorious life into us and around us. And to our joy and disbelief and wonder, in our hunger and grief and brokenness, and in our scarred and failing bodies, and in our suffering and abused world, we found that Jesus was with us, fully with us, and astonishingly alive to it all.