

April 22, 2012

The Third Sunday of Easter

Luke 24:36b-48

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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One of my favorite weekend pastimes is to get outside, for a run in the park or, when I have a chance, go for a hike in the woods. I am always ready to jump at any opportunity to get out and play in nature. One of the first things I do is take a full breath inhaling deeply to take in the wonderful smells all around me- the sweet smell of fresh cut grass and the pine tree aroma flavoring the air. And after those first sweet breaths in of fresh air, I start off: hobble hop, hobble hop, hobble hop. Now, I am not a marathon runner, there is no grace in my stride, no beauty in my form – I make a lot of missteps and probably look like I am stumbling along at a snails pace, but internally what I experience is absolute wonder over the strength of my leg muscles (and yes, sometimes yielding to vanity, I will look down and admire the outline of the muscles I have been working so hard to develop). And I am amazed over my own capacity to control my breathing, to feel that expansion and pressure of air in my lungs as I take in oxygen and then exhale. And even as I am gasping and gulping for breath, I have this little technique to distract myself from the panic that ensues as I gasp for air: I imagine the oxygen racing through my blood stream to supply sustenance to those hard-working muscles. And then finally there is my brain, the most important piece of the whole system. It works hard telling my feet to go, placing one in front of the other, adjusting the depth of each step as I race up a hill or mount a curb. This brain, this muscle is put into over-drive as I try to convince my tired, aching body to keep moving. Just five more minutes I tell myself, you can do anything for five minutes. It is an intricate, complex, beautiful thing this body that God has given to me.

And I have a love/hate relationship with it. I find at times that my body is both limiting to me and empowering. But it is mine and for better or worse I am stuck with it for life. This body allows me to experience the world more fully – to experience love in the embraces of my children and friends and family; and it allows me to serve another offering comfort with the mere touch of my hand. These bodies of ours are amazing. We have been gifted with five senses through which we interact with our world and discover details about our lives – the slightest smell of perfume might bring to mind your mother, or the taste of a certain food might call to mind times gathered around a table laughing with beloved friends. And so the strength in our muscles, the beating of our hearts, the force of our breath, the neurons firing in our brains, all work together as we engage the world around us. These bodies not only support us throughout our lives but are integral in who we develop into as individuals and how we experience this world. Physicality and embodiment are an essential component of what it is to be human.

And so here we have today an account of Jesus post-resurrection. Luke focuses on the body of Jesus. Jesus says to his disciples, “Look at my hands and my feet...touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” He is embodied, he is not some spiritual form floating around nor some disembodied spirit bumping into

things. He is appearing now to the disciples not as something that could be accounted for as imagined, but as a real touchable, physical body. And just so that there is absolutely no misunderstanding, he asks for food and he eats in their presence. He is real. Jesus is walking, talking and eating, just as you and I do. And this is so important for us that he is real, it shows us that Christ's humanity was not cast off in the resurrection. He remains as his disciples knew him, both fully human and fully divine. And so in his resurrection God has accomplished something new, there is life after death.

I know that this is challenging for us to accept, embrace or even understand. This something new that God has done can not be defined, contained or understood by our current modes of thinking about nature as a fixed order of things. Our understanding comes from our own limited experience which teaches us that something is alive, it dies, and then decays into the ground. But if we stay here in our limited understanding and don't open ourselves to the possibility for God to act/intercede in new and extraordinary ways, we might miss the redemption and grace being offered to and for us. In this resurrection appearance we see that God has conquered death. Death is no longer an ending, but is a new beginning, the beginning of eternal life with God. And so, our understanding has been turned upside down. The natural order of things as we know it has been transformed by God in the resurrection of Christ. And this is where faith comes in. This is where we acknowledge that our ordered totalistic systems of thinking are limiting for us and keep us confined in a very limited world of possibility. And once again we see that nothing is impossible for God and nothing, not even death, will keep us from the love of God. And so God does not remain within that confined order, but in the resurrection opens for us the possibility of seeing that which is beyond the probable, that which is beyond the natural order. In this we can begin to catch a glimpse of the promise of eternal salvation, and experience the kingdom of God.

So these bodies of ours, our "earthly tent" as Paul says (2 Cor 5:1), are so important. They are our present mode of life, and are the means by which we encounter this promise of salvation. And so they are sacred. This body, both yours individually, and the body of Christ gathered together here collectively, is the place where we experience transformations of ultimate significance. And these physical bodies are nourished, transformed and strengthened each time we gather around God's table and partake of Christ's body and blood. And even as we are nourished by the bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ, we become the body of Christ. God uses your body and this collective body of the faithful to transform lives. God calls your whole self mind, heart and body to bring about the new creation, the kingdom of God.

Your hands, your brain, your heart, your feet, these are all instruments of transformation both for ourselves and for those we impact. On Easter morning, we gave shouts of Alleluia over the empty tomb. We rejoiced that death is conquered. We marveled over the power of God. And now we see the beginning of God's new creation in the risen Christ.

God's work of bringing forth that new creation continues on in each of us. During Lent we did the difficult, spiritual work of self-examination. We acknowledged where we had

veered off and gone astray and we faced the darkness within ourselves. Now in this Easter season, we need to trust in the fruits of that work, trust that we have been transformed into a new creation, we have grown more fully, more completely into the person that God created us to be. We have moved closer to God and closer to living into our true selves. In this Easter season, we are a new creation. We hold within our bodies God's new creation.

And so even now, God is working through us, through our physical selves to offer God's love to a hurting world. Look down at your body, at your hands resting in your lap and hear Jesus' words once again: "Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself." You are the hands and feet of Christ. Take that into your self image. Hold onto that as a sacred part of yourself. And most importantly respond to it in word and action. God is alive in the world. God is embodied in each of us, and in all of us together as the whole body of Christ. So go out into the world and proclaim Christ's resurrection and the promise of salvation through your lives and with your whole self. Live as the sacred body of Christ that you are!