

“Holy, difficult bodies”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*John 12:12-16 and Psalm 139:13-18*

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

In the coming week, we retell a story we’ve heard many times: Jesus is hung on the cross, suffers and dies there, and is raised to life three days hence. But what if I were to tell you that that’s not the only version of the story? In 1945, a collection of early Christian writings were discovered in the Egyptian town of Nag Hammadi. Among them was the Gnostic Apocalypse of Peter. In it, Jesus Christ doesn’t die. He doesn’t suffer. He doesn’t feel the weight of the cross, or the pain of the nails. Instead, he stands on a hill, very much alive, laughing at the people who thought they could kill God, as he watches a surrogate, a mere human, die on the cross.

The story comes from an early Christian tradition of Docetism, which suggested that Jesus Christ never actually had a body; his human form was an illusion. Some said this was true his entire life. Others said that there was a human guy with a human body named Jesus, but Christ—the divine Word, God—entered Jesus’ body at his baptism (that was the dove), empowered him to teach and perform miracles, and then abandoned him when he was placed on the cross. Not an especially nice thing to do, but these ideas emerged out of the fundamental problem posed by the incarnation and the crucifixion: How could a perfect, infinite God have a body that suffers and dies?

Docetism is heresy (if you care about that kind of thing). It was rejected at the First Council of Nicaea. It defeats the whole point of a God who loves us enough to be with us fully, to take on our suffering and confront death. The forgiveness of sin, the resurrection of the body, the reunion of humanity and divinity, the triumph over death, all of it relies on the idea that Jesus died on that cross. And yet, I can understand why some early Christians wanted to spare Jesus the burden of a real body.

Bodies, of course, are wonderful—until they’re not.

Our bodies are gifts. Miracles, really. They accomplish intricately complex actions. They allow us to run, to see and hear, to feel the sunshine on our skin and mold the perfect snowball, to conduct surgery as well as orchestras, to birth children and create art, to sing Hosanna and wave palms. Our bodies are a fundamental part of who we are. Think about someone you love. Now try to do that without thinking about their smell, or their touch, or the sound of their voice. Try to imagine them without a body, or intelligence, or physical experiences.

And yet, as we age (and of course, for some of us, quite young), our bodies become troublesome. They fall apart. Sometimes, it’s all at once, through a cataclysmic event, but more often, it’s incremental—a process of our bodies wearing down. They lose muscle mass and power. Our lung and heart capacity diminishes. Our brains shrink. We develop arthritis, back pain; need joints to be replaced; take medicine to lower our blood pressure; our hearing, eyesight, and

memories go cloudy. And before we know it, the very thing that once gave us such joy, freedom, and power becomes that which takes those things from us. We can't run like we used to, or sing in the choir, or taste certain foods, or go a day without pain.

I remember how, when Columbia Seminary's president Steve Hayner got cancer, and he was going through all this pain, chemo, and grief, he said that one of the biggest losses was something he never expected to matter: the loss of his hair. It started in the shower, coming out in clumps, pieces of him lying on the wet floor. It wasn't vanity. It was that his hair was a part of him, and now it wasn't. He didn't look or feel like himself. He wasn't in control. And that was scary.

No wonder people wanted to spare Jesus that.

*That's* the gospel, though—that Jesus chose not to be spared.

He didn't flee to a hill somewhere to laugh at the fragility of our bodies. He stayed, to experience that fragility for himself.

Maybe you wonder what a young guy like Jesus could possibly know about getting old. But keep in mind that subjects of the Roman Empire, on average, lived to be only 28 years old.<sup>1</sup> Which means that when Jesus died at 33, he wasn't young; he was old. He experienced the same pleasures and aches, the same longings and frustrations, the same death and loss of control that we do.

He reminded us that our bodies are holy. God formed these bodies; God sees and delights in these bodies. "We are fearfully and wonderfully made," sings the Psalmist. "You are my body," Jesus says to the church. But he also reminded us that even holy things can fall apart. And as such, these bodies tell us something about God.

Bodies tell us that God's love isn't pure and abstract, only for the perfect. God's love is specific and concrete, messy and wounded, like our bodies. God isn't in a rarefied ether somewhere; God is here, manifest, expressed in this material reality. God can be touched. God can be heard. God can be loved. This whole embodied existence is the constant outpouring of God's love and creativity. These bodies remind us, then, that we are powerful (for we do wonders!) but we are also limited and dependent (for there is a lot we don't control).

Meg Brauckmann writes, "To be present to ourselves as bodies is to locate our own fragility; it is a posture of radical vulnerability and humility." And this she says is what Jesus reveals in his body. She remembers Thomas touching the scars of a crucified and resurrected Jesus, and how after, he proclaims, "My Lord, and my God!" She writes, "This is a statement of faith, but it is more than that. It is an encounter with the holy, terrifying mystery of an Incarnate God—a God who is wounded, who is changed by and whose body forever bears the mark of encounter with humanity. Jesus is a physical body, scarred by his vulnerability and love."

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<sup>1</sup> Atul Gawande, *Being Mortal*

For me, I think of the story we'll be telling in just a few days, when Jesus kneels and asks to wash the feet of his disciples—these aching, calloused, dirty, stinking feet, these beautiful, precious, miraculous feet that followed him.

What do we do with these bodies? Jesus tells us. We entrust them to God. God takes it all: the holy and the difficult. And as the Psalmist says, God is there through the very end, the end of our bodies, the end of our control. Somehow, even at the end, the Psalmist declares to God: "I am still with you."

God holds our bodies, just as Jesus held his disciples' feet, and holding them, God reminds us to be grateful, to stand in awe once again of these bodies, to see how even the body of a person lying in the bed of a nursing home can be wondrous. I think of Midge Drummond, and her hair done perfectly. I think of Jane Lumb laughing. I think of all the people I've visited, even on the brink of death, and their eyes looking at me, or just their chests rising and falling with breath—and how beautiful they were to me in that moment. And at the same time, holding our bodies, God acknowledges, laments, and cares for every ache and hurting place. God tells us that while our bodies are a part of us, expressions of us, they are not the entirety of us; even holy, we are more than our bodies. We can be strong, even when our bodies are not. We can be beautiful, even when we our bodies are not.

This Holy Week, God holds together our spiritual and material existence. God invites us to imagine that, even after death, God will *still* hold them together. Tradition calls it the resurrection of the body. But whatever this mystery is, it strives to tell us that—in life *and* in death—God can always be touched, always be heard, always be loved... and so can we.

These bodies will be dust. Yes. And yet, the mystery of the gospel proclaims that they will also be renewed. For these bodies are held in the hands of God, in life as in death, and if this week teaches us anything, it's that grace—indeed, resurrection—is what happens when we lose control, even over these holy, difficult bodies. **Amen.**