

“The Body” GPPC 4-15-18
Psalm 4, Luke 24:36-48

We say the Apostles’ Creed in worship at least once a month. This confession of faith came into the final version that we use in the eighth century. But its earliest form was developed around 180 A.D., only about 150 years after the death of Jesus.

Throughout history, candidates for baptism have spoken the words of this creed to affirm their faith. In fact, I heard someone say that if somehow outsiders (let’s say Martians) were to invade the world and confiscate all the Bibles, hymnals, and other Christian writings, if we had memorized the Apostles’ Creed, we would still know the essentials of the Christian faith. That’s how central this creed is. No wonder we require the confirmation class to memorize it.

The creed has a number of lines you could preach entire sermons about. For example, we say this line “I believe in the forgiveness of sins.” And maybe we think, “Well, of course, I believe in the forgiveness of sins. That’s what grace is all about. And that’s what the faith is all about.” But according to scholars that line was actually added

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to the creed later to readmit Christians “who had denied their faith during the persecutions of the second and third centuries...” (*The Presbyterian Book of Confessions*, page 6.) Imagine, there’s Suzie in the third pew who got one of her eyes gouged out rather than denounce Jesus. Sitting near her on the same pew sits Steven (unharmd) who said to his potential torturers, “Oh, no. I don’t know anything about this Jesus.” How do you have Suzie and Steven sitting in the same church on the same pew? “I believe in the forgiveness of sins.”

One Apostles’ Creed line that’s particularly strange for our 21st century ears is, “I believe in...the resurrection of the body.”

I believe in the resurrection of the body. What a peculiar thing to say. Why did the early church say that? Why is it something we continue to affirm on Sundays? And does it really matter anyway?

This morning, the third Sunday of Easter, we read near the end of Luke’s gospel. Jesus has been crucified and resurrected. He has already shown up incognito with two disciples walking on the road to Emmaus, interpreting scripture for them as they walk. When they arrive at Emmaus, the disciples practice hospitality and invite him to stay. They

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sit at table and Jesus takes the bread and breaks it. Then their eyes are opened and they recognize him. I believe this is a not so subtle hint that the risen Lord is encountered as the scriptures are faithfully interpreted, hospitality is practiced, and Holy Communion is observed. In other words, the risen Lord is encountered in the church and especially in worship.

But, as we just read, this morning Jesus shows up again. He stands among the disciples and says, “Peace be with you.” But instead of feeling peace, Luke says they are “startled and terrified” and think they are “seeing a ghost.” “Startled and terrified” seem like reasonable responses, don’t they? But Jesus doesn’t seem all that sympathetic. He says, “Why are you scared? Why are you doubting? Look at my hands and feet. See that it’s I myself. Touch me and see, because a ghost doesn’t have flesh and bones as you see I have.”

Luke says at this point “in their joy” they’re “disbelieving and still wondering”--a weird, swirling combination of feelings and thoughts. But doesn’t it also ring true? If we were there wouldn’t we likely move from

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“startled and terrified” to “joy” and “disbelieving and still wondering,” all those feelings and thoughts tossed into an emotional blender?

Then Jesus says, “Do you have anything to eat?” So they give him broiled fish that he eats in their presence.

And by this point maybe we see what Luke is trying to emphasize—Jesus has been resurrected with a body, in a body.

God could have chosen to bring Jesus back as a fond memory. “Oh, that Jesus, he was something, wasn’t he? We really miss him, but at least we have his superb teachings and we have some warm memories.” There’s an option.

Or God could have chosen to have Jesus return as a ghost. “Ah, there’s Jesus again, just floating around, flitting in and out, as ghosts are apt to do, you know? You can see right through him. But never fear, he’s a friendly ghost.”

God could have chosen those options or others. But God did not. As Luke and the New Testament make abundantly and repeatedly clear, God chose to resurrect Jesus in the body. Why?

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Because God loves bodies. Other faiths deemphasize the human body. They advise us to become extra spiritual by rejecting bodily pleasures, by engaging in grim asceticism in order to be open to God's presence. Other faiths reject the human body in order to embrace the spirit. But not Christians, and definitely not Presbyterians.

A couple of years ago, Beth and I went down to a North Carolina beach for a few days, and as providence would have it, we ran into the Guilford Park Presbyterian Church annual beach trip. There must have been fifteen or twenty of you staying in a house on the beach—and there was a little bit of trash talking when we showed up. I have no doubt you did some praying and reading of the Bible while you were there. But you also simply went to eat and drink together, to feel the cool wet sand under your feet as you walked on the beach, to breathe the salty sea air, to hear the crashing waves, to marvel at sunrises, sunsets, horizons reaching toward eternity, to talk, to rest, and relax—all in the body.

God loves bodies with all their wonder and diversity. God loves you and me in our bodies that, as far as we can tell, are unique. As far as we know, there is nobody else exactly like you or me, and that applies

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even to people who have identical twins. Similar? Yes. Completely the same? No.

And because God loves us as embodied people, like Jesus, we believe we're going to be resurrected in the body. And that has implications for what we value and how we live.

As one preaching professor put it, "Luke is saying no to those notions of spirituality that view the body and all things physical as inherently inferior or evil. Those who view themselves as just passing through this evil world tend to neglect the physical, economic, and political needs of other human beings...[But] No one can follow this Christ and say that discipleship means being only concerned with 'souls.'" (Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching the New Common Lectionary, Year B, Lent, Holy Week, Easter*, 184-185.)

So we Christians do care when people are hungry. We feed them with Pennies for Hunger, the Simple Gesture program, with gifts to Greensboro Urban Ministry, and with contributions to the Presbyterian Hunger Program. And we work to make sure hungry people are fed by reaching out to our elected representatives through Bread for the World,

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because as important as all the local feeding programs and wonderful mission trips are, if Congress or the state legislature slashes hunger programs then men, women, and children will go hungry. And God will hold us accountable if we are silent.

And we Christians care about economic matters. We don't all agree on every single point of economics, but I can safely say we want all people to be paid fairly for their work, paid enough to pay for adequate food, housing, clothing, education, and so on. And we want to protect people who've fallen on hard times and we want to help them rebuild. We certainly may argue about how high or low they should be, but we believe that taxes are a way that resources are shared with all in a decent society that values all people.

And we Christians care about politics, not in the sense of being partisan, but in the sense of always pursuing (imperfectly) policies that are more humane and aligned with the justice and mercy of Christ. So we tell our elected representatives to insure all our people have adequate, affordable health care. And we ask our elected representatives to make sure that all citizens, every race and religion, all ages, all

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genders and sexual orientations, be given equal rights. And we ask our elected representatives to enact comprehensive immigration reform that of course will not simply be open borders but will instead be compassionate, fair, and wise. It can be done.

And we Christians are opposed to torture because it is an affront to the living God and the human beings made in the image of God. And some of us (not I) are opposed to *all* wars. And others of us (here I am) accept war only when there is no other alternative, as a last resort, only in a limited way, only against combatants not civilians, and even then our pacifist Christian brothers and sisters may be right, and we may be wrong.

We do all these things and more not because we are Republicans, Democrats, or Independents. We do them because Jesus told us, “You are witnesses...” We are witnesses to what God has done and is doing in Christ. And we care for embodied people because we are Christians who worship Jesus who was resurrected in the body and said, “See my hands and feet. Touch me. And do you have anything to eat?”

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And finally because we believe in the resurrection of the body, it transforms the way we view life and death.

The 2013 movie “Captain Philipps” is based on the true story of Somali pirates taking over a U.S. merchant ship off the coast of Somalia in 2009. The four pirates are able to scale the sides of the ship. They take Captain Richard Phillips (played with brilliance by Tom Hanks) hostage in a covered lifeboat. Over five days, they hold Phillips in the lifeboat while they try to negotiate millions of dollars in ransom in exchange for his release.

Instead, the U.S. sends a destroyer to intercept the vessel before it can reach the Somali coast. As negotiations drag on, again and again the pirates threaten and beat Phillips. The tension is unbearable. The lead pirate is tricked into boarding the U.S. destroyer for what he thinks are negotiations. But while he is aboard navy snipers kill all three of the remaining pirates as a bound and blindfolded Phillips cries out in terror in the lifeboat.

At last Phillips is brought aboard the destroyer and walked to the medical unit. A young woman hospital corpsman (Chief O’Brian) and

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her young male assistant are waiting to care for Phillips. But O'Brian and her assistant are not actors; they are actual Navy sailors and medical personnel. And I believe O'Brian represents God as the movie soars from very good to sublime.

Phillips comes into the room. He is spattered with blood in his hair, on his face, on his shirt and pants. He is disoriented and on the verge of going into shock. O'Brian, utterly calm and with a soft, clear voice says, "Have a seat. I'm Chief O'Brian. I'll be your corpsman today. Okay? Can you please tell me what's going on?"

No answer as she begins to cut away his shirt with a pair of medical scissors.

"Can you talk? Can you tell me what's going on?"

"Um. Uh. I'm okay."

"Are you okay? Cause you don't look okay. Are you in any pain right now? No?"

Phillips seems not to understand. Again O'Brian asks, "Are you in any pain right now?"

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He points. She says, “Right there on your side. Okay. Can you let me see it really quick? Can you lift your arm a little bit? Does that hurt?”

“Little bit” he says. And he begins to cry.

“Is it tender? Go ahead and put your arm down.”

She takes her gloved hands and places them gently on either side of his neck and face and turns his face toward hers and says, “Okay. I need you to look at me. I need you to calm down. And I need you to breathe. There you go, deep breaths. There you go. Very good.

Awesome. Now I want you to relax your arms....”

“Keep breathing...What happened to your head? Captain, can you tell me what happened to your head?”

“I uh. They uh. Uh. Uh...”

“Okay. Take your time.”

“Uh. Uh.”

O’Brian turns to her assistant. “Two centimeter laceration on the left eyebrow.” The assistant writes it down and the exam continues with O’Brian noting all the injuries.

Phillips begins to sob. “Oh God...”

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O'Brian says, "It's okay. I need you to look at me, and I need you to breathe. Do you understand, captain?"

"Yes." And the exam continues.

"Okay...Captain, you're safe now." "Thank you." "You're welcome." "Thank you." "You're welcome."

I believe God loves bodies. So I believe in the resurrection of the body. And I believe this corpsman represents God.

We each live these lives of ours filled with goodness, gladness, joy, and pleasure, but also facing evil, struggling with pain, dealing with wounds sometimes visible and sometimes invisible, with trauma so deep we sometimes cannot even speak of it. And I believe when our lives end we face God who is like that corpsman--utterly calm, speaking with gentle clarity, saying "I need you to look at me. I need you to breath." Then God names our wounds. Heals those wounds. Brings us back together with the rest of the children. And finally God says, "It's okay. You're safe now." And we say, "Thank you."

I believe in the resurrection of the body. It's okay. You're safe now. Thank you. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal