

Walking in Love
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
April 11, 2021-AM Service
Reverend Ruth Boven
2 John

Well, it's the Sunday after Easter, sometimes called 'Low Sunday.' The Sunday after celebrating one of the biggest, highest, holiest days of the Church's liturgical year. What's there to say after all the wonder and praise and all the "He is Risens" of last week?

Well honestly I like this Sunday. I like the Sunday after because it always begs the question; what difference does it all make? Today is a good time to ask ourselves how are things different because Jesus walked out of the tomb? To get a little more specific, the question we want to answer today is what difference does it make that Jesus walked out of the tomb with a body, a body of human flesh?

The preacher Barbara Brown Taylor tells of an experience she had as a guest preacher once at a grand old Episcopal church in Alabama. The church had a striking mural of Jesus emerging from his tomb at the front of the sanctuary. Since she had arrived early, she took some time to study the painting. Above her Jesus was stepping out of the tomb with his hands raised in blessing. Roman soldiers slumped in sleep on either side of the tomb with Easter lilies blooming under their noses. What was striking to her was that except for a white cloth swaddling his waist, Jesus was naked, his skin the color of a pink rose.

Taylor said she could not remember ever having seen so much of Jesus' skin before, especially in church. She understood the message the artist was going for, that even in Jesus' most transcendent moment, the moment that set him apart from the rest of humankind, Jesus remained recognizably one of us. Jesus came back wearing skin.

But there's an interesting twist to the story because studying the painting further, Taylor realized that something was missing in the painting.

Studying Jesus' lifted arms and chest, she suddenly realized – there was not a single bit of body hair anywhere. Though the artist made clear that Jesus walked out of the tomb with a human body, it really wasn't like our bodies. She was a bit dismayed and frustrated that the artist portrayed Jesus' body as somehow different than ours: better, smoother, more perfect than our own ordinary acned, freckled, wrinkled, scraped, cellulited, hairy bodies.

That story gets at a question with which the church has wrestled for centuries. Are our human bodies good or bad? Are they something to be valued or shunned? Our text this morning aims at that question. You see at the time John was writing, Gnostic beliefs and teachers were on the rise. What do Gnostics believe? Well, they didn't think bodies mattered much. They believed they were a temporary, necessary evil. They rejected the idea that God came in the flesh and had a body like ours. True spirituality, they believed, was about having knowledge, knowledge is what mattered, a knowledge that only some could attain.

But that's not what the Bible teaches – which is why John was so fervently raising a red flag. In the beginning God looked at the creation of our human bodies and said they were very good. And of course, the ultimate proof that bodies matter is that Jesus, the Son of God, had one. To say even more...Jesus didn't just come and inhabit a human body for a while, sloughing it off when he was finished with it. As the gospel writers report, Jesus appeared after his

resurrection in a changed, but still flesh and bones, eating and drinking body. And here's the most spectacular thing, Jesus remains in that body even now.

Okay so getting back to our question. What difference does it make that Jesus walked out of the tomb, wearing our human flesh?

Well here's one thing it does. It gives us bright hope for the future. The apostle Paul indicates that in our flesh, Jesus overcame our enemy. Jesus has won the definitive and final victory over all the ills that our flesh is subject to. Paul says that for if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. Our own flesh and blood has already been raised from the dead! I know of nothing that brings greater comfort than that gospel truth and that future hope.

But there's more that Jesus bodily resurrection means – and it has to do with our lives now. Our lives today. Our ordinary lives in these ordinary bodies. In our text for today, John's instruction, in light of the resurrection is this: in our bodies - walk in love. The Greek word for 'walk' actually has a broader sense to it than just putting one foot in front of the other. The way you walk is the way you go about life. It's the things you do day to day in your body. John says *walk* in love.

There are two things I want to say about walking in love. The first is this: walking in love takes practice. Practice that requires using our bodies. Barbara Brown Taylor is convinced that faith is nurtured in us through practices of the body. She writes, "Why else did Jesus spend his last night on earth teaching his disciples to wash feet and share supper? With all the conceptual truths of the universe at his disposal, he did not give them something to think about together when he was gone. Instead, he gave them concrete things to do – specific ways of being together in their bodies – that would go on teaching them what they needed to know when he was no longer around."

This summer, I plan to officiate at wedding where the bride and groom will wash one another's feet during the ceremony. I've been thinking about that. I suspect that years down the road when the guests who are present remember that day, they will likely not call to mind some of the many eloquent words I will say about love. My guess is that what will be called to mind is the bent over bodies of these two adult people – who, on a day when they are the center of all the attention, humbly kneel down over an ordinary basin of water and wash the other person's feet. What a powerful way to bodily practice their commitment to go forward walking in love.

Walking in love takes practice. You know, throughout our days, there are a thousand ways our bodies help us love God and others. Maybe you practice holding hands together as you open your family meals in prayer. Maybe you find it a helpful practice to make the sign of the cross, or to hold your hands out and open as you pray or to kneel in reverence before the Giver of life. Our bodily practices day to day shape us. They matter.

I heard this story once and honestly I don't know the source of it. It's a story about a Dutch minister who during World War II was imprisoned in a heavily forested area of Germany. He and the other prisoners were allowed out at times for brief walks in the snowy forest around the camp. The pastor along with the other people of faith made a plan and started coming together for those few minutes in the forest every day. They'd first gather together closely in a circle and hold hands with one another. They'd sing a song. Someone would recite a

memorized verse or two. The pastor would say a prayer. Then they'd sing one more song before their brief time ended and they quietly marched back to the prison.

That pastor was eventually released and went on to study theology, more specifically-ecclesiology-which is the study of the church. But in all of his in-depth, advanced studies about the church of Jesus and what it should look like, he could not get that bodily experience out of his head. Despite all of his intellectual training and degrees in doctrine, the pastor still landed on this conclusion: that what was practiced out there in that "church in the snow," was Church in its purest form. Walking in love takes practice.

Here's the second thing about walking in love. When we embrace the truth that bodies matter to God, we can't help but care about the bodies of others. As followers of Jesus we hear him calling us to honor the bodies of our neighbors as we honor our own. Jesus reinforced that message himself by honoring leper bodies, possessed bodies, widow and orphan bodies as well as foreign bodies. As one commentator put it, "read from the perspective of the body, [Jesus'] ministry was about encountering those whose flesh was discounted by the world in which they lived."

Recently, a story has resurfaced that happened over 50 years ago. It's a story about 6 poor teenage boys who were from the Pacific Islands and were living in a boarding school on the island nation of Tonga. One day these restless boys hatched a plan, a not very well thought-out plan. They stole a boat and started out for Fiji. They had no idea what they were doing. The very first night their sails were torn to shreds by a storm. They floated for eight days before they were washed up on the shore of a tiny dot of island where the boat was smashed to pieces and they spent the next 15 months trying and praying to stay alive. It's a fascinating story.

Then one day, an Australian fisherman was passing near the island, when something caught his attention and the next thing he knew one of the young men was swimming out toward his boat. The other ones, seeing what was happening, also jumped into the water off a nearby cliff and swam frantically out to the fishing boat.

The fisherman was horrified and a little uncertain about the story they were telling. But when he radioed for help, the operator affirmed their story and the fisherman delivered them back to Tonga, where the owner of the stolen boat immediately pressed charges, had them arrested and demanded they be locked up.

But it didn't happen. It didn't happen because you see the fisherman was someone who practiced walking in love and saw those 6 bodies as just as valuable as his own. And so, though he had only just meet these poor, restless, rule-breaking, robbing teenagers - the fisherman voluntarily, quickly and quietly paid their debt to the boat owner. And the teenagers were free to return with overwhelming joy to their families.

Friends, when you walk the way of love you'll see that the path is already worn because Jesus walked it first. Being the first down the path demanded his body and blood. But on Resurrection Day he walked out of the grave in our flesh. Which means that as we keep walking in love - we are never alone and are given strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow. And someday this very body will encounter Jesus and his very body and we'll eat and drink together at the wedding supper of the lamb in the new creation. Thanks be to our embodied God. Amen.