

Second Sunday of Easter (Year A, RCL)

WOUNDED RESURRECTION: THE BODY OF CHRIST FOR THE BODY OF EARTH (John 20: 19-31)

By William P. Brown

The gap continues to widen between liberals and conservatives regarding the distressing reality of climate change. It is perplexing, given that science continues to confirm humanity's central role in affecting global warming. It is even more perplexing that greater familiarity with science does not guarantee a greater sense of urgency as evidenced in recent research. It appears that political ideology, not scientific ignorance, remains the primary determining factor in the current debate over the acceptance of climate change, its causes, and what can be done about it.

Perplexing indeed.

According to John's Gospel, a moment of perplexity ensued during the disciples' first encounter with the resurrected Christ. Earlier, Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene in a case of mistaken identity until Jesus called her name. In his more public encounter, Jesus is not recognized by the disciples until he shows them his "hands and his side." The resurrected Jesus is recognized not by his words but by his wounds, the wounds of his crucifixion. Herein lies a great irony. The crucifixion has left its indelible marks upon the resurrected one, such that the risen Jesus is recognizable only through them. The marks of mortality, specifically the brutal marks of execution, turn out to be the definitive signs of Jesus' resurrection. On the one hand, resurrection has not erased his wounds. On the other hand, Jesus' wounds no longer define him as a dead criminal, as determined by the state. Jesus doesn't wince at Thomas's touch. Even as his wounds remain, Jesus' body is made whole and new.

The resurrected Jesus is no ghost. Yes, he passes through locked doors, but Jesus also invites Thomas to place his finger in Jesus' hands and his hand in Jesus' side (v. 27), fulfilling the doubting disciple's criteria for belief. I have often wondered how might that have felt for Thomas, to touch resurrected skin, to touch Jesus' wounds. Did he feel an electrifying spark, or was there a gentle sense of warmth to the touch? Regardless, I suspect Thomas and his fellow disciples also felt something else: a twinge of guilt, knowing full well that they had abandoned and denied Jesus in his greatest moment of need, when his hands and side were pierced to the bone. To see and touch the resurrected Jesus, particularly his wounds, must have pierced their hearts.

The text does not say what Thomas felt at this tactile moment. The account is more concerned with sight than with touch. And yet there is a touch of the tactile in this account, much like in Genesis 2:7 when God is said to have "formed the Adam from the dust of the ground, and

breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.” This isn’t Michelangelo’s depiction in the Sistine Chapel of a white Adam and a patriarchal God “connected” only by separated fingers. The God of Genesis is the One who gets dirty working the soil to fashion a body, a “groundling,” and who performs CPR (or better CPS) to give it life. When Jesus, according to John, “breathed on” the disciples to impart the Holy Spirit (v. 22), something happens comparable to God breathing into Adam, filling his lungs. New life is given, and along with new life, new responsibility. For Adam, this leads to the responsibility of caring for the garden; for the disciples, the responsibility of becoming church.

It is with this sense of bodily intimacy that we must acknowledge that there is more to Jesus’ wounds than simply the matter of visual identification. Jesus’ wounds bear permanent, tangible testimony to his crucifixion; hence, they serve as an enduring, visceral reminder of our capacity to commit violence against others even as we are called to love the other. Christ’s body has absorbed the ravages of human violence for all to see, touch, and ponder, not to avoid or turn away from.

Christ’s wounds remind us that Jesus was crucified by the powerful to maintain the status quo, religiously and politically. Today, our planet is being crucified by the powerful, its greatest consumers, which includes most of us reading this text. The setbacks will be real, many of them irreversible: countless species extinctions, collapse of fisheries, rampant deforestation, demise of coral reefs, rising sea levels, acidified oceans, and, of course, rising global temperatures, caused indubitably by the unprecedented rise in greenhouse gases from industrial nations. The human toll is mounting: famine and drought yielding starvation and death with increasing frequency across the globe, more and more refugees fleeing their drought-stricken lands or sinking coasts, a rise in mental health issues for those who have suffered repeated flooding and storms. We cannot look away.

Thanks in part to science (and not hoaxes), the wounds of the world are becoming ever more visible as they strike ever more deeply into our lives. As our modern-day sentinel, the scientist continues to sound the alarm ever more vigorously, recognizing that the wounds we inflict today will endure for a long time to come, to be suffered by our children and their descendants. As people of faith, we recognize that the root causes of climate change are not CO₂ emissions from SUVs and coal-fired plants, or methane emissions from Concentrated Animal Farming Operations (CAFOs) but rather human greed, narrow vision, indifference to the plight of others, and the fear of lifestyle changes, all insisted upon in the name of individual freedom and market free capitalism. The GDP has become our Gross Depletion of the Planet.

Does Jesus’ appearance to his disciples speak to our difficult entry into this “long emergency”? On so many levels. But here are two, one negative and one positive. First, the wounds we inflict will endure. The planet we pass on to our children will not, and does not, resemble the planet we inherited. Perhaps we should rename our planet “Eaarth,” as Bill McKibben suggests. In any case, Jesus shows us that his wounds cannot be glossed over. Rather, they must be seen and

felt...and believed! Perhaps the bridge that can bring together liberal and conservatives is having visceral contact with the deepening wounds of the earth, personal contact with flesh and blood victims of polluted water and rising sea levels. Personal contact with lives disrupted by drought, flooding, and storm. Sharing grief. On the positive side, in Jesus we bear witness to a moral vision of life in which the beloved community understands itself as part of, and on behalf of, the biotic community: the Body of Christ for the body of Earth. It is a vision birthed in resurrection hope, in which wholeness and renewal remain a gifted reality, and yet reality that is also something to strive for, as much as to hope for. It is the church taking seriously its calling to be a sign of the new creation. It is the enduring dream of God at work among those who have hope, or who desperately need it: "See, I am making all things new" (Revelation 21:5). Wounds included.

Bible Study Questions:

- 1) Do Christ's wounds and the world's environmental crises share anything in common?
- 2) David Orr has defined hope as a "verb with its sleeves rolled up." What gives you hope in the face of mounting environmental degradation and political intransigence?
- 3) How do you respond to the allegedly Christian notion that we're just "passing through" in this world, and so this world is inconsequential?

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2) For liberals (and conservatives): *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* by Barbara R. Rossing. New York: Basic Books, 2005.

3) *For conservatives (and liberals) Saving God's Green Earth: Rediscovering the Church's Responsibility to Environmental Stewardship* by Tri Robinson with Jason Chatraw. Boise: Ampelon, 2006.

4) For liberals (and conservatives). *Inhabiting Eden: Christians, the Bible, and the Ecological Crisis* by Patricia K. Tull. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013.

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