

An Embodied Resurrection

April 4, 2021 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Daniel A. Smith

Texts: Luke 24: 36-49

We said before, and we've been singing all through Lent, "to everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven." Today, at last, we come to a time for rejoicing, a time for laughter, a time for new life and joy! So, let's start there. To help us out, Sarah recently asked us kids to share some of their favorite jokes. Here's just a sample.

[Video of kid's joking and laughing!]

Thanks to all the kids and teachers who made that happen! And of course, I now need to add one or two of my own good-bad-dad-jokes. Ready?

How did the hamburger introduce his partner?

Meat Patty!

And one more: What is Beethoven's favorite fruit?

Ba-na-na-na [to the tune of Beethoven's ninth]!

Are you laughing? Chortling? At least smiling? Or maybe just rolling your eyes? I have no idea! I can't see you so humor me and let me imagine a sanctuary full of the belly-busted lot of you. I begin here not only because we all need some levity these days but because I wanted to us to begin in our bodies and what better way than to do that than through laughter! As our text for today makes clear, Easter was a profoundly embodied experience, for Jesus and for those first disciples! Yes, at Easter, we sing the hymns, hear the trumpet sounds, and see the tulips and lilies laid before us. We celebrate creation's splendor and new life rising from the cold, hard ground, and let us rejoice and be glad in it all. And yet, there's more to the Easter story, and with it an invitation to wonder about how new life and love may arise in us, *in our very bodies*, especially when we are all holding so much!

To get there, we need to recall that Easter itself begins in cold, hard ground too, that of a first century graveyard. Before that, it starts in the embodied pain of cross. And before that, in the powerfully embodied care of Jesus's life and ministries. And way before that, in our creation story and in God's affirmation of the inherent goodness of our bodies and of the earth. On Easter morning, the pain of Holy Week especially is still with them all, it's in their bodies. The women arrive first to the empty tomb to anoint his body. Luke tells us they were "terrified and bowed their faces to the ground." In John's account, Peter literally runs away from the tomb. Thomas and his crowd are cowering behind closed doors. Later and in our passage for today, we're told others were "startled and terrified" to see him. Their bodily systems are still charged by the grief and trauma of witnessing their beloved teacher on the cross. And *this* is just where Risen Christ

meets them and us: rising in body and love from the hard yet fertile ground of shared grief and trauma. To understand the power of what's happening in all their bodies, we too must start in our own.

I've been thinking a lot about bodies lately, and not just thinking about it but spending more time out of my head and in my body, which has been an amazing gift. A few weeks ago, I had the privilege of attending a day-long, online anti-racist training with Resmaa Menakem, author of Times best-seller, "My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies." His Minneapolis based work as a somatic therapist, first working with couples and then soldiers and vets, has taught him that all our bodies carry trauma, whether as victims, perpetrators or bystanders. He is convinced that the healing needed in our culture, from racialized trauma that spans generations, must begin in our bodies -- in white bodies, black bodies and bodies of culture, even police bodies. He shared at the time that he was getting ready to work with the Minneapolis Department of Public Health to train community leaders to prepare them to hold some of the re-traumatization of this week's trial of Derek Chauvin. If you've listened to the news coverage, the eye-witness testimony of people asked to relive the terrible moments of George Floyd's murder, you know what I'm talking. In his book and trainings, Menakem invites us to get out of our heads, out of our us/them, good/bad narratives, and to respect what our bodies subconsciously do to protect us in moments of fear, stress and discomfort, those biochemical 'fight, flight and freeze' responses that cause us to lash out or withdraw or shut down in the face of harm or stress. Knowing that even talking about race can heighten our stress levels, he shared throughout our time together powerfully embodied mini-practices to help us stay grounded and present to the work. Regular invitations to pause and to breathe. Reminders to get out of our heads and set aside whatever judgements and scripts may be running. Instead, it was about noticing how we were feeling in our bodies. Notice where it hurts, where we feel the tension, where we feel constricted or constrained. He taught us to look out the window, to take in the sky or a tree, to look over our shoulders, to touch our faces- all simple acts which studies show can decrease our stress and increase our sense of calm and even safety. Many were reminders of the goodness of the earth, the fundamental goodness of our bodies! Menakem knows too well that hurt people hurt people, that stressed people inflict stress on others. We need these practices to help us metabolize the stress, pain and grief our bodies endure! What's more, he believes, he's seen in his work, that when we can so pause and notice and respect our animal brains and our embodied defenses, we can slow down our over-reactivity or break through our tendencies to freeze up or numb out, and let a new, different, more fearless, more compassionate energy emerges!

Heavy stuff, to be sure, but this invitation to pause, notice and resource our bodies, the very idea of letting our bodies metabolize our pain has been a healing balm. It's also given me a new lens through which to appreciate the power of Jesus ministry, how utterly grounded, present, in his body he was in his life, suffering, and death. *And*, in his life after death, in his resurrected body!

Luke and other gospel writers repeatedly make the point that Jesus returns in his body, still bearing wounds. The very word for wound in Greek is *trauma*! On Easter, the grief and trauma of Good Friday is still with them, yet the very pain of this world has already been metabolized in him, archetypically transformed if you will, in his risen body. He rises and returns in new life

and love, and not the least bit reactive, defensive or vengeful after all he had been through! He stands secure in the strength of God's enduring love for his body, and for every body. It's as if the great pause, the grounding stillness of Holy Saturday, let his body hold and heal and become something entirely more powerful. It's supercharged with the fuel of all that radically redemptive suffering turned to Compassion and Love. Whether the resurrection, factually or physically happened remains a great mystery to me. What is clear is that the body, his and ours, is the primary site of God's loving transformation.

When he greets his followers "startled and terrified," they aren't there yet; they haven't had time to process it. I imagine him counseling them and us from his newfound embodied wisdom: Pause. Breathe. Let God's peace be with you and in you, as it with me. Don't be scared or doubtful. I know it's natural but get out of your heads, your animal brains! Be here with me, in your bodies, as I'm still in my body! Notice it... "Look at my hands and feet." he says. "Touch me and see." "The wounds, the trauma, the pain, violence and death of our world are real. There's no getting around it. So, let's first notice right where it hurts and then see what God has done and what is doing to transform it! See how God's radical love for my body, your body and every body is stronger than whatever wounds, grief, illness or pandemic. Let God's care for my wounds and the wounds of every body tend you and rest inside. Pause. Notice what's going on in your bodies. We can talk about it later, first let's be in our bodies. Let's eat. How about some fish?"

After they eat, he spells it out. Now, they are to proclaim all the more his message of repentance and forgiveness to all the nations. As in, they need to own and reckon with their human pain, not with a tendency towards fear, but with the assurance of God's love, a force so powerful it conquers death. Secure in God's love, they are freed up to confess the things they've done and left undone, to be vulnerable and honest about their own hurts. They need to hold it and feel it all in their bodies and let God's love metabolize it before it turns toxic. Do this and hey and everyone around them can know the healing, restorative, liberating energy rising from the ground of being itself. He even gives them and us a meal, so we can remember the pain, the peace *and* the risen power of it all! He says: 'Here's my body! Wounded, broken, transformed in love for you! Take it all inside of you, and eat *this* bread of life, drink *this* cup endless joy. Sense God's eternal love for your body and every body. Come and taste of Resurrection, in your bodies! And then go and be *my* body, the body of Christ, to love and care for the world! It's your turn now, so go and put some skin in the game!'

On a blustery but beautiful Friday, March 19, my birthday, I had a chance to take a long, mid-day, blue-skied solo drive out to Race Point in Provincetown. Cruising along, I called up a song by one my favorite hip-hop groups, De La Soul. Its upbeat, almost gossypily chorus goes like this:

*Pain will make it better
Tell me how you feel
Look over your shoulder
Time will make it real
Pain will make it better!*

This isn't just hip-hop! This *is* gospel! This is power of the Easter promise that, as De La says later in the song, is 'gon use that pain for fuel.' Not fuel for violence, vengeance, fear or denial, but fuel that *will make it better*.

I know all this embodied talk may be a stretch for some of us. We like to *talk* about injustice, racial and otherwise. We are starting to *own* it in our stories. Yet to feel the way this mess of a system does harm in, conditions and constricts all of our bodies, that's new territory for me and for most of us. After all, here at First Church we tend to be a pretty neck-up, in our heads kind of crowd. We are spiritual descendants of the Pilgrims and Puritans, the so-called "Frozen Chosen" here in New England. Frozen, indeed. Our own theological traditions, all that misguided, mostly male focus on 'the sins of the flesh' have left us too often cut-off from our bodies, perhaps especially our white bodies, whether progressive, proud boy and police! Our system of "white body supremacy," the centuries of assuming that a certain white body is standard, as Menakem teaches, has left many of us tragically uncurious, even blind to what it means to need God's love for and in our bodies, to experience God's love for and in our flesh!

That always grounded, dark-skinned Palestinian Jewish body knows all about it. De La Soul knows. Toni Morrison, in her masterpiece novel, *Beloved*, about the experience of enslaved bodies, she knows it. She writes: "In this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. You got to love it. This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. So, love it, love it and the beat and beating heart, love that too." She knows that people can't truly love the bodies and flesh of others if they don't love their own bodies and flesh first! And this is the message and the great good news of the resurrection! It echoes God's affirmation of bodily goodness at creation. God's love for and in our very bodies and all of creation is ever-present, ever-rising and everlasting. The wounds of crosses and lynching tree, the grief of death, the realities of illness and even a Pandemic have met their match! Love wins!

The Pandemic has happened to all of our bodies -- the vulnerability, grief, loss of in-person connection, the very constriction of our movement! And yet, what an opportunity for loving transformation, for embodied Resurrection, and *after* this profound pause we've all been enduring, no less! Post-resurrection, we can all the more imagine a new and decidedly, different post-pandemic world! Soon we will come together, returning to this empty tomb of a sanctuary from the cold hard ground of the shared grief and trauma of this last year. Like the first disciples, some of us may still be terrified, some disbelieving that we can actually be together in our bodies, but that disbelieving joy rising from within.... from the hard ground of this past year.... mmmm! Don't think about it! Feel it rising up in you even now. Today, we can taste it's promise! Out of the zoom boxes, out our heads, the chance to let God's love for our bodies and *every* body rise in us, whatever shape we are in, whatever age, race, gender expression or ability, bearing whatever wounds. In-person, embodied resurrection, a new chance to be body of Christ, the church! And what a time to do things differently, to get out of our too-busy minds, to imagine what a more deeply embodied church culture would like and be, that weeps and laughs together all the more, to imagine what an anti-racist church culture looks like attuned to the experience and needs of bodies that aren't white, a church culture that also follows the lead of our feeding and homeless ministries, ready to meet every body in their bodies! How can we stay in our bodies, and put *our* skin in the game all the more?

Friends, this is no joke! It's better! It's better than the best bad dad jokes ever! It's the way to our healing our ages-old wounds, the way to our collective liberation, the way to embodied joy. Pause. Notice. Feel the love for your body and every body rising in you even now! For Christ is

Risen and with him the gospel of our eternal, embodied belovedness! Alleluia. Amen!

