

**A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church**  
**By Chris Fillingham**  
**“Touching Our Bodies”**  
**John 20:24-29**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter**  
**April 8, 2018**

A week after Jesus’ resurrection Thomas’ faith finally catches up to the rest of the disciples. Caravaggio’s painting of Thomas touching Jesus’ side is probably the most famous image of this scene. It’s a classic.

[hesitation]....But it’s kind of gross, isn’t it?

I mean the gaping hole in Jesus’ side?

The wrinkle of skin folding over Thomas’ finger as it goes into Jesus’ body?

Every time I see it, I sort of wince. It almost makes *my* side hurt...

Of course, maybe I’m seeing it all wrong. Jesus’ body is resurrected after all... maybe it doesn’t hurt. In fact, maybe it’s more like when I poke my kids in the ribs to tickle them.

Which sort of changes how you see this doesn’t it?

I know they all look so serious, but if this were one of those live photos that our phones take now where you can see what happens just a few seconds before and after the shot...

We might be surprised.

You never know what happened next.

Maybe in all the excitement Thomas starts tickling Jesus’ ribs and takes off running. The rest of the disciples all start laughing as they watch Jesus chase Thomas down, put him in a headlock and give him a noogie. “You believe because you’ve seen me. Blessed are those who believe without seeing or poking me in the side, Thomas!”

Maybe?

I don’t know.

What I’m sure about is that this is one of those moments in the gospel story that we’ve spent so much time thinking about: Thomas’ doubt and what it means to believe, and trying to figure it all out, doubt and belief, in our heads that we miss *just how physical* it all is...

This isn’t just a story about Thomas needing proof of the resurrection. It goes much deeper. It’s more of a story about the ways that our physical body is a guide to encountering mystery.

It’s a story about how important your body is... because our bodies are one of the primary ways we encounter God.

Your body is one of the ways you have of knowing things...

Your body has its own kind of wisdom and awareness...

Your body is a guide for the soul...

Most of us have just never been taught how to listen to it, have we?

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In fact, part of what makes us squeamish about this painting is just how much body contact is going on here. It's a bit too fleshy for our sensibilities. I think...we'd prefer it... if Jesus kept his scarred up body... covered behind his clothing, rather than expose himself this way.

Because in our culture we're squeamish about the body.  
In fact, we have a really unhealthy relationship with our bodies.

It's true in so many ways.

On the one hand we glorify fake bodies, bodies that are rooted in fantasy rather than reality. We've cultivated appetites for male bodies and female bodies that can only be found on people whose professional job is to try to shape and sculpt their body in a particular way.

But even they aren't enough.

Surgical enhancements are needed.

And even that's not enough...

So their bodies are digitally enhanced to push our appetites farther from reality.

We glorify fake bodies and then put them up on shrines on the side of the road we call billboards... to be admired and worshiped by men and women, adults, teenagers, and children as we drive down the road, to school, to work, and to church.

And that is only half the story of our unhealthy relationship to bodies.

The problem goes deeper. It started way before we were admiring fake bodies. That's really just a symptom... It started with all the deep shame we carried around in **our own bodies.**

We all feel it at times, don't we? That shame might be subtle or it might be quite present... but it's there for **all** of us in one form or another.

For some, the shame is amplified because we feel so far from the fake bodies that are enshrined on the side of the road.

For others, shame grows in us because of something that has happened to our body along the way, or something we've done with our body...

And for some, it's because our bodies won't do what we want them to do... they won't work the way we want them to work... and we've come to resent our bodies.

I don't know what it is for you. But I do know that even for those that haven't had a particular trauma... or an unusual set of circumstances... there is still a certain amount of shame they carry around in their body. It is part of the human condition. It has been there since the innocence of our childhood began to fade and we first started noticing our bodies in relationship to other bodies.

And it goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden... when our first innocence was lost.

Before the loss of innocence at the end of Genesis 2 the scriptures say, "The man and his wife were both naked and not ashamed." That's how we were created to be. That's what our relationship to our bodies was intended to look like: without any shame.

But something happened. We ate the fruit of making judgments about one another, or the fruit of “the knowledge of Good and Evil” as it says.

And now with those judging eyes, Adam and Eve’s innocence began to fade,  
and they started noticing their bodies in relationship to one another...  
and the first thing they do is cover themselves up from one another.

The second thing they do is hide their bodies from God. Genesis 3 says, “They heard God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his *wife hid themselves from the presence of God because they were naked.*”

And I hope you see the connection, because it’s really important for us to catch. ***The shame in their bodies cut them off from the presence of God.***

The shame you carry in your body... can cut you off from the presence of God... even in ways you are hardly aware of.

Because remember, your body is a guide for the soul...

It is one of the primary ways you were created to encounter God.

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We’ve lost this wisdom along the way, but it’s being recovered these days. It’s actually being written about in lots of different fields... biology, neuroscience, psychology...

In fact, there is a growing consensus that we have three centers of awareness...

Three faculties for knowing things, for knowing one another... for knowing truth, for knowing God. Those three faculties are: the mind, the heart, and the body.

For those of you that have studied the enneagram, you might remember that this is actually the foundation of the nine numbers. In enneagram language it’s what makes up the triads: thinking, feeling and doing, our mind, the heart, and the body.

For those of you that haven’t studied the enneagram... you’ve encountered this too, you simply might not have paid attention to it. You’ve probably experienced knowing things intuitively through your body here and there.

It can be as simple as feeling the warmth of the sun on your face... and what that does to open your soul and your spirit.

Or it can be as profound as holding a newborn baby against your chest and feeling that intimacy and oneness where it feels like your bodies are melting together and your heart is expanding. There is a profound connection that grows...

It’s not ***just*** a feeling. Scientist have learned that in those moments the baby’s body is doing things to your body, and your body is actually regulating that baby’s body... That’s why a baby that is never held will not thrive. Its body hasn’t learned to regulate its own life. It needs the physical touch and presence of its parents’ body.

A similar phenomenon even happens between two friends having an intimate conversation, even if you are not touching one another. Simply by being present to one another, your body is actually physiologically changed by your friends body... and theirs by yours.

Our bodies talk to one another in ways we hardly recognize.  
It's fascinating when you study this!

But what I want you to see today is that our bodies are a profound and holy way through which we connect... through which our soul is moved. And the saints have recognized that often God comes to us, not through logic and ideas, and not just our hearts, but through our bodies.

In fact, this is at the heart of the mystery of incarnation and resurrection, the bookends of Jesus' life. In both the incarnation and in the resurrection God is making "human flesh the privileged place of the divine encounter," as Rohr puts it.

God comes to us in a body. And God resurrects the body... The incarnation and the resurrection are not just mysteries about Jesus. The tradition has said that they are inviting us to see something about ourselves, about our own embodied lives.

Our bodies are sacred and holy, "the privileged place of divine encounter."  
Divine encounter happens in and through our bodies...

Which means that the shame we carry in our bodies is not a reflection of reality, but a lie from the Evil One... It's the oldest lie we've been told.

Body shame, body loathing, body hatred,  
are all deceptions  
to cut you from the presence of God.

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So I've begun to think that Thomas' words must be about more than Thomas... as the disciples often are in the gospels. The disciples so much of the time are holding up a mirror to us...and our own journey with God. Thomas is telling us something about ourselves.

When he says, "Unless I put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe..." he may be saying something about you and me.

Hearing ideas isn't always going to be enough. If we want to learn how to believe... if we want faith to take root in us... then we're going to have to engage more than just our minds. We also have to engage our bodies.

And I think Jesus is telling us that today, too. His words to Thomas are his words to us. "Put your finger here, see my hands. Reach your hand out and put it in my side." Jesus is telling us to use our bodies...to touch his body... "Put your finger here. Reach out. See. Touch."

It's not just an invitation... It's almost more of a command.  
And that's there in this painting too.

Do you notice what Jesus' hand is doing in this painting? He's grabbing Thomas' wrist. After all, I imagine Thomas would have been pretty hesitant to actually touch Jesus, even with the invitation. Wouldn't you?

But Jesus has grabbed Thomas' wrist, and he is pulling him in... drawing him into his own body... because he knows just how uncomfortable we get when it comes to our bodies.

In fact, I've found myself thinking that this resurrection scene in particular is a powerful moment in which the resurrection of Jesus is undoing the scene in the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve are hiding. ***He will no longer let them hide. He's pulling them out of the shadows of shame.***

Jesus is grabbing Thomas. Thomas is touching Jesus... all of it is restoring a kind of physical intimacy... a body connection that was lost in the garden.

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And what we need to recognize is that Jesus does this not just by showing Thomas a glimmering, shiny, perfect resurrected body. That's not the story of our faith at all.

Jesus shows Thomas his ***wounded, scarred, broken... but holy body.***

It's an invitation to see our bodies in a very different way. It's a shocking way of helping us to see that like Jesus, our bodies won't be perfect.

Our bodies will carry wounds in them.

Our bodies may offend some,

And they may be broken in some way...

Our bodies will carry the scars of this world.

***Our bodies are not meant to be perfect, they are meant to be holy.***

And there is such a difference between the two.

Perfection is harsh and impersonal.

Holy bears the wounds of love.

Perfection is a lie.

Holy is a blessing.

Perfection is an impossibility we shrink back from.

Holy is a love that pulls us in.

Perfection is just another false god we've created.

Holy is a means of connection with the one true God.

Your body was not created to be perfect. It was created to be holy.

"Put your finger here, in these nail scarred hands.

Reach out your hand and put it in my wounded side." Jesus says.

"Allow your body to reach out to my body.

Come to know me through both of our broken and beautiful bodies."

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I know that's a stretch for most of us. We're not used to thinking of our bodies this way. For some of us it feels weird and uncomfortable, I know.

So I want to invite you to try something... something that might feel a little strange, but I promise it's not nearly as strange as what Jesus made Thomas do.

I want you to simply put both your hands on your chest or on your gut. Either one.  
Go ahead.... And close your eyes.

Now I want you to repeat after me:

***My body... is a holy vessel.***

***God comes to me... through my body.***

***God speaks to me... through my body. [repeat]***

I want to invite you to do that simple exercise every day this week... as a way of living into this resurrection story.

You could even do it in the car as you drive to work. Turn your commute into a spiritual exercise.

Even better, do it as you exercise this week.

Or as you get your hands down in the earth to start your spring planting.

Say it again, "My body... is a holy vessel." "God comes to me... through my body. God speaks to me... through my body." Try it this week, and see where that takes you.

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For today... I want to tell you that this is one of the several reasons that I've guided us toward making communion a regular part of our worshiping practices. I know that's not the traditional practice for those of us that have grown up in Baptist churches. Every week? Sermon, offertory, and scripture reading every week because they feed us. They connect us to God.

For a lot of us, the sermon has always been set up as the primary way we encounter God. Certainly, God comes to us through ideas and words... but our minds are not the only way God comes to us.

Our bodies also open us up to God's presence.

Our bodies need to be engaged in worship as much as our minds and our hearts.

And there is no better way to do that than to stand and to walk, bringing our bodies forward to encounter his body given for us.

Here at this table, Christ is grabbing us by the wrist and pulling us into the mystery.

"Put your finger here, in these nail scarred hands.

Reach out your hand and put it in my wounded side from which my blood flowed."

Here in the bread and cup, our minds are no longer in control.

Here at the table, our bodies become the guide.

Take a moment to connect with your body and allow our bodies to carry us into the love of God.

Amen.

## Silent Reflection

*The tender flesh itself  
will be found one day  
—quite surprisingly—  
to be capable of receiving,  
and yes, full  
capable of embracing  
the searing energies of God.  
Go figure. Fear not.  
For even at its beginning  
the humble clay received  
God's art, whereby  
one part became the eye,  
another the ear, and yet  
another this impetuous hand.  
Therefore, the flesh  
is not to be excluded  
from the wisdom and the power  
that now and ever animates  
all things. His life-giving  
agency is made perfect,  
we are told, in weakness—  
made perfect in the flesh.  
—Saint Irenaeus of Lyon (c.130-c.202) [1]*