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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco CA Z18
5 Lent (Year C) 11:00 a.m. Eucharist
Sunday 24 March 2019

Isaiah 43:16-21
Psalm 126
Phil. 3:4b-14
John 12:1-8

Extravagant Love, Intelligent Bodies

"We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come."

What did Mary of Bethany see? What did she recognize in her friend Jesus as the house "filled with the fragrance of perfume" (Jn. 12)? The Puritans used to preach sermons with three parts. These were: Scripture, Doctrine (or a church teaching) and a study of how we apply this knowledge in our life. This morning I am using the same three parts.

1. Scripture. All four biblical gospels include the story of Mary's extravagant love. At the end Mark adds, "Truly I tell you wherever the Good News is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her" (Mk. 14). And Jesus was right.

This act captures our imagination. It moves us. It shows us Jesus. It reminds us of the importance of extravagant generosity in our life that makes holy places like this Cathedral possible. The Love Window on the South Aisle includes one of the most beautiful female images I know of and shows Mary drying Jesus' feet with her hair.¹

The story begins outside the frame of this reading. John writes, "Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that anyone who knew where Jesus was should let them know, so that they might arrest him" (Jn. 11). In the shadow of this danger Jesus visits the house of his friends Lazarus, Martha and Mary.

As Martha serves them, Mary astonishes everyone by anointing Jesus' feet with oil that costs a full year's wages. If this were not enough she then wipes his feet with her hair. The Pharisees in the Gospel of Luke call her a sinner. In all the gospels the men around Jesus denounce her with talk about how the money should go to the poor. But Jesus defends her extravagant love.

The philosopher Philo of Alexandria (20 BCE – 50 CE) writes about the ordination rituals of Moses. These involve washing the feet of a priest. He writes, "Now by the washing of the feet the walking is no longer on earth... For the soul of the lover of God is towards truth leaping upwards towards heaven... joining in the dance with the sun and moon and the all-holy, all-harmonious host of the other stars."²

Mary anointed Jesus as a kind of priest and king. She could see two truths which should have been obvious to everyone but weren't. First, because she really hears Jesus she understands something his male friends simply cannot face. She knows that Jesus, the one who changed her life, the one she loves so deeply, is going to his death in Jerusalem. Have you ever been with someone who you knew would soon be dead? She sees this purpose in their shared meal.

Second, she understands the importance of honoring human bodies, particularly the body of Jesus. What we say with our bodies is usually far more powerful than what we express in mere words.

2. Doctrine. Although most Christians say they believe in the resurrection of the body, a lot of other extraneous pictures have confused what this means. The Ancient Greek philosopher Plato (428-348 BCE) believed that we all have an immortal soul that exists before our body came into being and continues after we die. In *Phaedrus*, Plato describes this soul as Reason or a kind of chariot driver not so successfully trying to control two winged horses (one of which has a moral nature and the other is our unruly desire).

The French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) lived during a time of unparalleled religious conflict.³ Scholars estimate that up to three-fifths of Germany's sixteen million people were killed during the Thirty Years War (1618-1648).⁴ Descartes wanted to find a basis for religion that would be universal and available to everyone as opposed to appeals based on tradition, scripture or earthly authority.

And so he famously sat by a fire and began by imagining that he could doubt almost everything.⁵ He could imagine his senses deceiving him about what the world was like. He doubted even about having a body. But he knew that doubting had to stop somewhere – for him it was with the part of us that makes these decisions. He writes famously, "Cogito ergo sum," "I think therefore I am."

That "I" was the basis for all of his reasoning. It led him to regard the world as composed of two kinds of things: what we might call body and mind, the physical and the spiritual. Descartes believed that only human beings have this spirit, that the rest of the world is effectively dead. Although animals seem to have feelings and emotions, Descartes regarded them as nothing more than machines.

This dualism, this division between the material and the spiritual is not the Christian picture but it has a profound hold on how we experience the world and even our own bodies. I believe it leads us to mistreat other species, to be insensitive to the effect of

our actions on the natural world. Instead of "being" a body it makes us talk about "having" a body as if we could do without it.

The idea that we could just download our consciousness onto a machine or the fantasy of a singularity when machines advance beyond human beings and effectively take over the planet, come from this picture of a disembodied human essence (of having intelligence without a body).⁶ For me believing in the resurrection of the body as opposed to an immortal soul, means taking seriously how we treat other bodies and the natural world. It is a way that we fully realize the extraordinary uniqueness of every life.

We cannot separate body from mind. My former teacher Margaret Miles writes that we are intelligent bodies.⁷ She is right. I was surprised that when I started coaching my son's basketball team, my body remembered perfectly how to shoot a jump shot from the top of the key. This is true of casting with a fly-fishing rod, playing the harmonica or clarinet, catching a baseball, cross-country skiing, or singing the doxology. We say, "it's just like riding a bike" to describe the uncanny way our whole self remembers practical, physical things.⁸

We respond to bodies. A newspaper article this week referred to a 2017 study.⁹ 110 people were selected and exposed to electric shocks while being connected to an MRI machine. One group of subjects held hands with a spouse, lover or friend. Another group held the hand of a stranger, and the last group were shocked by themselves.

It turns out that holding hands with your spouse significantly reduces the physiological stress of the shock. Holding hands with a stranger has no effect. Our intelligent bodies know who is close to us.

3. Application. Faith is not something that just happens in your head. We experience it with our whole selves. Each person is unique. We can be put into groups and categories but these will never perfectly fit us. We are bodies who have been given the chance to care for others.

Yesterday we had eight hundred faithful people here for the last Why Christian conference. My friend Cameron gave a presentation that just rocked me. I was the pastor of Cameron's family church while he was in college. We stayed loosely in touch as he followed exactly in my path through the same seminary, doctoral program and then ordination in the Episcopal Church.

Cameron spoke about his experience as a trans person in the church. He talked about making the transition during the ordination process, about his bishop Tom Shaw who

asked him to, "Be patient with me as I learn." He talked about discerning, "how might God be calling me to embody my gender." Although being trans has put him in danger, he talked about the way he feels God walking with him.

Cameron quoted the First Letter of John, "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him" (1 Jn. 3:2). I knew all the pieces of the story before he began, but when I saw his vulnerability, his courage and his faith it almost moved me to tears.

On Friday Nadia Bolz-Weber told me a story about a woman who came to another one of these conferences. She had been a conservatory musician but the further she advanced as a trombone player the more conflict she experienced with her teachers. She played music moving her whole body and they wanted her to stand still.

One day the professor came up behind her stood on her heels, put his hands on her shoulders and literally weighed her down. Although she said that she had loved making music that was the last day she ever played the trombone.

That night Nadia searched the whole town to find a trombone. In the middle of the service the next day in front of hundreds of people Nadia presented it to her and asked her if she would like to play again. The woman played Amazing Grace. Her whole body swayed and the room echoed and swam in the beauty of her music.

What did Mary of Bethany see? She really saw the person she loved. She saw Jesus and the power of the human body. God is calling us to real resurrection right now, not just to believe in our heads, but to live our faith with our whole selves, with our unique desires, with our particular way of building up the people around us.

So leap upwards. Hold hands. Dance with the sun and moon. Make music with your whole body. Let this house be filled with the fragrance of perfume as God blesses us now and in the life to come.

¹ This window includes images from three different Mary's as if they were all the same person (Mary Magdalene). Michael Lampen, *Cathedral Sourcebook* (San Francisco: Grace Cathedral, 2005) 19.

² Philo, *de Specialibus Legibus* I, 207. Translated and cited in Herman Waetjen, *The Gospel of the Beloved Disciple: A Work in Two Editions* (NY: T&T Clark, 2005) 288.

³ 5 Lent (4-10-11) A.

⁴ The conflict involved Germany, Bohemia, Poland, Denmark, Sweden, Switzerland and France. Margaret Ruth Miles, *The Word Made Flesh: A History of Christian Thought* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 325.

⁵ René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*.

⁶ Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* (NY: Penguin, 2005).

⁷ Margaret Miles gets this language from Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *Corporeal Turn*, 20. See Margaret Ruth Miles, *Recollections and Reconsiderations* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2018) 18.

⁸ 5 Lent (4-10-11) A.

⁹ Benedict Carey, "Beyond Biden: How Close Is Too Close?" *The New York Times*, 4 April 2019.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/04/health/psychology-metoo-biden.html>