

that never will. Bodies that are addicted and bodies that are recovering. Bodies that are ‘normal’ and bodies people stare at. God loves people, and therefore God cares about our actual bodies: their safety, their health, their well-being.

What we believe about the resurrection of Jesus’ body, or anything else in faith, matters not because God is keeping track, checking off whether we believe ‘correctly’ in our minds or not. God is not doing that. What we believe matters because it shapes our faith and how we live. If we believe, or can at least entertain the idea, that Jesus’ actual body rose from death, then we will honor bodies more fully than if we think at Easter, Jesus discarded his body for something better. Yes, eventually Jesus did ascend to God and it was his Spirit that came to dwell among us. But the gospels take great pains not to skip over the time where the body of the risen Jesus walked and talked and ate with his friends once more.

The logical implication of this theological doctrine is that our bodies are precious and meaningful to God; that these ‘human suits’ we wear contain the image of God. And so believing in the bodily resurrection can only lead us to minister to other people in their real, physical need. It means we cannot dismiss the pain of others, even when laws or danger try to make us ignore them. It means we are called and perhaps responsible to give aid to those who are suffering. And it means we cannot ignore the needs of our own bodies, because they are precious to God, too. So whether we are doubting or believing, we can joyfully honor the bodies God has given us and minister to the people around us.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.

- 1 Amy-Jill Levin and Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Luke*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press), 2018, 673.
- 2 Justo L. Gonzalez, *Luke*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 280.
- 3 Rose White, “Wrong turn leads to ‘secret detentions’ at Ambassador Bridge, immigration advocates say,” MLive, April 25, 2025, <https://www.mlive.com/public-interest/2025/04/wrong-turns-lead-to-secret-detentions-at-ambassador-bridge-immigration-advocates-say.html>



First Presbyterian Church
of Royal Oak

May 4, 2025
Third Sunday of Easter
“Bodies Matter to God”
Rev. Emma Nickel
Scripture: Luke 24:36-53

Within our Presbytery—which means all the Presbyterian churches in our denomination around Metro Detroit—I help to train and prepare new pastors for ministry. One of our roles is to do an examination of each candidate just before they get their first job—their first call to be a pastor of a church. In these examinations, any question is fair game that relates to their beliefs and how they understand God. There is one member of our committee, my friend Paul, who asks every candidate, “do you believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus?” While that’s not a question that comes up every day in church, it matters a lot to Paul. And a similar statement is also in the Apostles’ Creed, which we say many Sundays—“I believe in the resurrection of the body.”

Despite those words in the creed, I bet if you and I had to answer Paul’s question, there would be a wide range of beliefs about it. Some of us have probably never really thought about it. Some of us would agree with Paul that, to be a Christian, you must believe that Jesus’ actual body was resurrected and brought to life once again. But some of us focus on the way science cannot explain what happened to the cells and atoms of Jesus’ body on Easter. Yet they are certain that the event of the empty tomb decisively impacts their understanding of God, and that’s what really matters. What you individually believe on this issue is not a huge deal to us here. There are many ways to be faithful. But what does really matter are the implications of our beliefs. What we think about God and the resurrection impacts how we act and how we live everyday.

So today at least, I want us to side with my friend Paul. I want us to take seriously the notion that Jesus’ actual, physical body was dead; and then was alive again. Luke has been hammering home this idea of the bodily resurrection of Jesus in the gospel, both in the passage about the walk to Emmaus that we read last week, and especially in what we read today. Luke wants to be clear: the risen Jesus is really alive. He’s really the same person with the same skin and bones, hair and beard,

that ministered to his friends a few days before. The risen Jesus was not a ghost or an apparition. He was not some kind of hologram that just tricked their eyes. Though he eventually ascended to be with God in heaven, the empty tomb meant that Jesus' real, human body was raised from the dead to be alive again.

Every detail of this passage is meant to drive this point home. First, Jesus invited his friends to reach out and lay their hands on him. "I have flesh and bones. You can touch my hands and feet if you want." We don't know for sure if any of them took Jesus up on the offer, but either way, they learned that they could. Then, though it sounds like a non sequitur change of subject, Jesus said, "Got anything to eat?" The disciples produced a piece of fish. They gave it to him and he ate it: chewed it in his mouth, swallowed it, and it landed in his stomach. Demonstrating again that Jesus was really alive in this amazing resurrected body. Touching skin, eating food—these are things only real, live people with bodies can do.

So why does this matter? Who cares what we believe? Why is my friend Paul asking new pastors about this? Why are we saying these words in a creed 2,000 years later? The reason is because *bodies matter to God*. They always have. Way back at the beginning of Genesis, we learned that all bodies—all people—are made in the image and likeness of God. And, as commentators Levine and Witherington write, "If we begin with the premise both that Jesus is the incarnation of the divine and that he returned from the dead in a real body, then we must conclude that bodies are important."¹ We have to move away from the mistaken idea that only spiritual things matter to God. At creation, God made people with flesh-and-blood bodies and wished for them to be comfortable and happy in those bodies, with nothing to hide. Jesus was born in the body of a human baby. That our God became flesh is the good news of Christmas. But it's not far from the good news of Easter, too: our God still had flesh. When God found victory over death, that did not mean that Jesus got rid of his body and immediately became a spirit. Quite the opposite. When he rose on Easter morning, Jesus stayed in that body for a little while longer. His resurrection did not erase his skin, heart, and bones; it made that body new and holy.

Here's the part, though, that's really, really important. If bodies matter so much to God, then bodies must matter to us who follow God's way. As Justo Gonzalez writes, "Because his resurrection is not a merely spiritual matter, [disciples] cannot limit their service to purely spiritual matters. The Lord who showed his resurrection to his disciples by eating with them invites his followers to show his resurrection to the world by feeding the hungry. The Lord who broke the bonds of death calls his

followers to break the bonds of injustice and oppression."² What we believe is important, but how we treat other people who are also God's children—that counts the most.

Bodies matter to God. So the bodies of people who are hungry and struggling in our own towns must matter to us. On Friday night, our Christian Education department hosted a Parent's Night Out. Kids came to church for an evening of fun while parents got a few hours on their own. While they were here, the children created blessing bags which their families can give to unhoused folks they might see out and about. In Sunday school, the kids had planned out what items would be needed: water bottles, granola bars, and so on. And now each kid has a bag to keep in their family's car ready to help someone who could use it. Our kids care about the people they see and that caring comes from the faith they are learning. As the adults who lead them, we should follow their lead on a small scale. And on a large scale, we must be sure to hold ourselves and our leaders accountable to policies that similarly honor bodies when it comes to affordable healthcare, support for good food to eat, and programs that nurture young children so they get a head start in life.

Bodies matter to God. So the bodies of people who are being detained not so far from here at the Ambassador Bridge must matter to us. As many of us know, once you get off I-75 heading toward "Bridge to Canada," it's almost impossible to turn around. There's 'No re-entry to the U.S.,' just as the signs warn. MLive and many other news outlets have reported on immigrants recently detained at the bridge, sometimes with their U.S.-born children.³ One Guatemalan mom was heading to Costco but accidentally followed GPS directions to a store in Canada. After her wrong turn, she was held at the bridge for five days with her five-year-old and one-year-old children, without appropriate food, sleeping conditions, or medical care. It's hard to know how to help when we hear of situations like this that feel so far out of our control. But we cannot stop caring and praying. We are called to urge the people who lead us to lean into just solutions, not to pull back from helping. If Jesus' body mattered enough to rise again, then we are called to honor one another's bodies, too.

Bodies matter to God. So your body and the bodies of people you love are worthy of care and gentleness and wholeness, even though they are imperfect. That means bodies that are scarred from surgery and ones that are covered in tattoos. Bodies taking Ozempic and bodies that are deemed 'too big' or 'too small.' Bodies that are riddled with cancer and bodies that eat fiber and take vitamins. Bodies that conform to society's definitions and labels, and bodies that do not. Bodies that are making money and bodies that are out of work. Bodies that have birthed children and bodies