

"Out of the Head, Into the Body, Then, Out of the Body into Ecstasy"

Sometimes we think too much. Sometimes faith and religion get reduced to what you believe. But to get to the immeasurable greatness of God's power and the oneness of spirit that Jesus prayed for we have to get out of our heads and into our bodies. In this way we just might experience the mystical realities of the spirit in new ways.

I am going to combine three very different passages of scripture from the lectionary today and read them through the lens of a body positive Christianity. I warn you in advance these interpretations and conclusions are not traditional but oriented toward liberation. I also want to make clear at the outset that I believe in resurrection. I believe in incarnation. And, it is on these two principles that I build my case for embracing incarnation can we get to resurrection. But, it is our incarnation and it is our resurrection that is my focus today.

First resurrection;

Today is Ascension Sunday, a story found in Acts but also in Luke. But how shall we make sense of a dead man returning to life and then ascending into the heavens when it is in violation of scientific laws of cellular death, organ atrophy, not to mention in defiance of the laws of gravity?

How to find a message of hope and transformation when the hoped-for messiah who was supposed to bring political liberation from oppression and establish God's reign of righteousness /justice on earth actually ended in a gruesome death and a magical leave-taking?

How do we make sense of a God in a human form who floats away to heaven leaving his scars and wounds behind when we are stuck with ours? And given that, how are we to think about our human bodies and desires when the church want us to denigrate the flesh, ignore or trivialize our own needs and desires and says that our very love of pleasure is sinful, if not an abomination, to God?

Now about Incarnation...

The Christian story is one of God's intimate intervention in and involvement in human history as meant in the term Incarnation, God-in-the-flesh. But how do we approach the scripture that says we are to be witnesses? To what shall we witness? Magical mysteries of ascensions? Is the gospel about a defiance of science? I think not. I think a portion of the good news of liberation and transformation that Jesus lived, that he taught is found in the exact *opposite* of what the church has, for centuries taught as gospel. ie. Religious belief is found in our heads, we must get out of our body with its messy desires and someday we'll know ecstasy, although the church calls it heaven.

It is not the first time the church has gotten things wrong; slavery, the sun's supposed revolution around the earth, a 10,000 year old planet, women's

subservient status and lack of ability to make considered moral decisions, homosexuality, abuse of planetary resources. The church has too often been anti-science (and embraced magical fantasies instead of Mystery) and been anti-body (and embraced celibacy and virginity instead of divinely-given pleasure of mutually satisfying intimacy.)

Oh yes, the church has been wrong before. So we are to be witnesses of what...?

Out of the Head, Into the Body

Well only get into our bodies when we first, get out of our heads. I used to think that if I just believed the right things then God approved of me. If I got enough other people to believe the same things as I did, then God rewarded me. I thought belief was something that happens above the ears. It is memorized scriptures. It is repetition of creedal statements and believing in miracles that defy science. It is keeping track of your sins and making sure that you asked for forgiveness for every single one of them because we all know that God is keeping score. We talked a good game about ‘personal relationship to God/Jesus’ whatever that was. But the reality was we earned God’s favor by allowing into our brain only certain prescribed, pre-approved belief statements. And, by having that dogmatic stance meant we would earn God’s attention.

Yes, I shudder to think of myself when I was a young teenager. I was the farmer’s daughter who wore homemade clothes trying to convert the wife of the town doctor. Yes, I was a dreaded bible-quoter out to make the world believe as I did. But think about it. Belief is in the head. Christianity has been guilty of too often of neck-up theology; witnessing, evangelizing, proselytizing, prayer as talking at God. Blah, blah, blah. Belief in words. The problem with this is that there is no soul-yearning when we live in our heads, when our religion resides up there.

The Sufi mystic writes “*We are like lutes once held by God. Being away from (God’s) warm body fully explains this constant yearning.*” (“The Constant Yearning” in *The Gift*.) There is no constant yearning in our heads.

But, of course, progressives don’t do those things, right? So what kinds of head trips do we do? Probably thinking we can eliminate all kinds of injustice if we just work hard enough. But it is possible to get disconnected from love in our search for justice. We too can begin to think that working hard enough for the right causes we earn God’s favor. The Christians who teach “just believe in Jesus” focus on the head, but progressive Christians focus on the work to be done, endlessly done because of our beliefs as well. They are just different beliefs.

But a faith that is stuck in our heads either through memorized dogma or doing good works of justice ultimately cannot feed our spirits. The head is a long

ways from the heart and it is divorced from the senses of our bodies. But the Bible says “Believe and you shall be saved.” Right? The biggest error is; belief as we think of it today is not what Jesus asked for. Belief in a pre-modern Aramaic mindset was not about beliefs, intellectual mind games or structural analysis of unjust systems. When the Bible talks about belief it means being about the heart like saying, “I believe in you.” That statement does not mean “I see you and touch you and therefore I believe you are alive.” I believe in you is not memorizing your phone number as verification of your existence! Belief is heart-to-heart, soul-connection.

Into the Body

H, but there are reasons we stay in their heads; the body carries wounds and emotional scars. And we fear looking at them. But as Hafiz writes “Fear is the cheapest room in the house. I would like to see you living in better conditions” (p 39 in The Gift). Gestalt therapy tells us that our bodies have data connected to the non-verbal part of our brain. If we listen to our bodies we can hear the messages that are trapped in there.

This was made evident to me during vocal lessons during those years when I could not sing. I had lost the will to sing even tho I had done so all my life. Then one day a vocal teacher pushed me to go into my body and push the air out, as I did so my body sent up messages trapped there; “Little girls are to be seen and not heard. Be quiet. Ladies are never loud, ever. Nobody wants to hear about you.” It was this pain that was trapped in my body and which was part of the reason I could no longer sing.

Another time in a seminary class of gestalt group therapy we were standing in a circle and told to individually make a positive statement of pride and confidence and to say it loudly. When it came my turn the professor pointed out how my body was already making the statement. Without my head realizing it, my body was speaking.

I am convinced that those who have a sexually repressed Christianity have memories of shame instilled in their bodies when, as children, they enjoyed the body’s sensations and were made to feel guilty. They were taught pleasurable behaviors are sinful and wrong. That is a long way from the open abundance of spirituality about which the poet writes. “There are so many gifts still unopened from your birthday, there are so many hand-crafted presents that have been sent to you by God. The Beloved does not mind repeating, ‘Everything I have is also yours.’” (p 67 in The Gift.) And if we can accept this then the poet connects the physical and spiritual view: “Wherever God lays a glance, life starts clapping. The myriad creatures grab their instruments and join the song. Whenever love makes itself known against another body the Jewel in the eye starts to dance.” (p. 85 in The Gift.) That Jewel is God.

The central teaching of Christianity is Incarnation, God in the flesh, God in our midst or, as Jesus said, 'I in God and God in me.' It is to be grounded in the simple and profound idea in Genesis 1 that earth creatures are made in the image of the divine. Emmanuel, God with us, we sing at Christmas. Yet over and over we refuse to get out of our heads (or in the progressive tradition we refuse to give up the belief it is all up to us if we keep working). We don't recognize God in these hands working for justice or God in these bodies, our sensual and sexual bodies. When the Creator blew the first breath into the first earth creature God was instilling Spirit, God's very essence into us. Divinity.

*"Blow through me, Breath of God. Blow through me.
Like a pipe, like a flute, like a reed, making memories.
The cosmic song in me, Breath of God."* (Miriam Therese Winters)

The Creator's breath was making sure that we are spiritual beings having a physical experience. We won't get to that understanding until we experience it outside of our heads. And we can't get there til we embrace the body and admit our physical being is wrapped in this wondrous package of sensuality. It is not about *believing* in God it is about *knowing* God.

I led a workshop that was a part of a discussion series last weekend with people who were exploring sexuality. Not coincidentally I don't think any were religiously observant, a few were spiritual. Many of them came out of the church however, in large part, because there is no good news about the body to be found inside the church. There is either body-negativity and control or ...a profound silence.... So let's break the silence. First, we have to get rid of the old expectations of body perfection. This is what I did in the workshop. Repeat after me:

- i. I am not your dream come true.
- ii. I am a flawed person.
- iii. And so are you.
- iv. My body is not perfect but it is good enough.
- v. My body is God's gift. And it's good enough.

Now that we have addressed the perfection issue, let's get into our bodies. Repeat after me:

- vi. Pleasure is good. I like feeling good
- vii. Intimacy is good. I like being intimate.

- viii. Connecting with others is a human need. I like to connect with others.
- ix. I love being in my body because I am a beautiful person.
- x. I am a child of God so I can take care of myself.
- xi. And if I have trouble, I have friends who will be there.
- xii. It is normal to feel anxious so,
 - a. I can let it go and be in my body.
 - b. It is a good body.
 - c. It is good to be in my body.
 - i. I am made in the image of God
 - ii. And it is good,
 - iii. No, it is very good.

In my search for God I had to get out of my head and into my body although this body held such pain; memories of sexual abuse, bad sexual decisions, silent suffering, and far too much guilt, and shame. I had to shift my faith from my head that believed my unworthiness and get into my body to recognize I am no more flawed and damaged than anybody else. (The bible says, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." And Jesus said stones can only be thrown by those who have no sin.)

Shifting to embrace our fleshly body means we do not abuse it, either through self-medication with alcohol or drugs or by overeating or not eating, or holding idealist visions of being thinner or buffer. Embracing our body, not hedonistically but to live in the essence of divinity that is within, letting it shine through our actions, to be sure, but also through our composure, the energy level, the compassionate presence, our composure in stress, and the peace within ourselves that we tap into only through spirit. It is to realize God's glance and to start dancing in the rhythm that happens when "life starts clapping."

The writer of the letter to Ephesus said he never ceased to give thanks for that house church in the first century. Why? Because he writes "**1:15 I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints. ..the eyes of their heart were enlightened. (vs. 18)**

It was their faith and their love flowing outward toward others. They were connected to spirit within their fleshly bodies, they were living the dance of spirit.

They were being witnesses as Jesus had instructed in the ascension story in Luke 24; **You are witnesses of these things. 24:49 And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."**

Clothed with power from on high. What is the hope to which we are called? (Eph 1:18) What are we witness to?

The writer of the gospel of John who was writing much later, perhaps to the Jewish grandchildren of the followers of Jesus and those attending the synagogues and he was trying to figure out, at this late date, what the gospel was and what they were to witness to. So as he writes of a prayer of Jesus, perhaps this captures the essence of this promise in chapter 17,

Jesus prayed in verse 21 *“that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.* (Remember, belief is not in the head, but here in the heart, in the inner person. It is a believing that causes the world to gravitate toward us at a spirit level, an energy level because when we recognize goodness and see godliness our divine natures are drawn to it.) Jesus says, in verse 22 *“The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one,*

17:23 I in them and you in me, that they may be completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

It is not about memorizing bible verses or walking lockstep in church-decreed dogma or dismantle the earthly structures of oppression. Jesus’ vision was for unity of spirit, the oneness of love. It is about embracing the divinity in these bodies as Jesus did, this one who called himself “the Human One,” this one whom we call the Incarnated one, God-in-the-flesh, in human form. It is to see ourselves differently than the world sees itself.

For the world says life is all about “getting yours here and now because that is all there is It is deeply conflicted about the body. And some bodies are better than others and I can do with mine as I choose.”

But the faith mantra is to, “I in you and you in me.” It is the Quaker discipline to look into the eyes of one another we see the Divine. It is the Sufi mystic’s understanding that if we would kiss God we simply lift our own hand to our mouth. (p 64 in The Gift) The incarnational gospel to which we witness is the unity of spirit through these incarnational vessels, that we are spirits having a physical experience, with beautiful bodies that enjoy pleasure as God’s gift, giving, loving one another as all of us swim together in this vast pool of divine love and abundant forgiveness. And maybe, just maybe on some days it is all so right, and all so beautiful, and all so awesome, we just might catch a glimpse of ecstasy itself. And God says,

I am ecstasy. I am the quickened breath in the silence before creation.

Ecstatic union is my art form and pleasure is my name.

You I desire. You I long to hold. I long to pour myself through your body and to make love to you.

*Come to me, come sing with me, come laugh with me, come dance with me,
come be life we me, we can be life together, I in you and you in me. Come.*

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Lectionary readings: **Luke 24:44-53, Ephesians 1:15-23, John 17:20-26 17:20**