

We Are Witnesses

**Sermon preached on Sunday, April 18th, 2021, Third Sunday in Easter
by the Rev. Mary Keenan**

One of the things that strikes me most about the Gospel reading from Luke today is this picture in my mind of the wounded body of Christ appearing to and reassuring his terrified friends. The physical, resurrected body of Jesus shows up to be with the confused gathering of what will become the Church. The disciples experience fear, doubt, wonder, and joy all at once. And there with them is the scarred body of their beloved Lord saying, "Peace be with you."

It is this focus on the body of Jesus, the body of Christ, that captured my attention. This real, physical, wounded, human body. In no small part this image of Jesus has been in my mind as I - and all of us - have been bombarded with images of other wounded bodies. The body of George Floyd on video, pleading for air. The body of 13-year-old Adam Toledo with his hands up. The bodies of scores of people who have been killed or injured in the almost 150 mass shootings we've had in our country so far in 2021.

Closer to home, however, and on a regular basis, I think of the bodies of our sisters and brothers here in Austin who are homeless. Whenever I drive from my home to St. Mark's, I pass under Hwy 71. Every day, at any time of the day or night, there are women and men camping there. You've probably seen them, too and wonder about them.

Their bodies and their minds are wounded just as surely as was the body of Jesus - scarred by violence, by misuse of power, by indifference. This community of people trying not to be homeless is on my mind especially now because as a city, as a community we are being asked to consider whether or not to criminalize their status, their homelessness. Whether to criminalize their efforts to shelter themselves in a city that has no other shelter for them. And by making them criminals, we are considering putting up another barrier to housing when it does become available.

It is actually harder than ever to get housing in Austin. The numbers of people without shelter has grown due to the economic fallout of the coronavirus pandemic. At the same time, Austin has a housing crisis - not enough houses for those who can afford them - and that is driving up the cost of housing for everyone. Especially those who can least afford it. As a point of reference: In Austin, if you make minimum wage, you would need to work 18 hours a day, seven days a week to afford a one-bedroom apartment.

And so I wonder, what does the Gospel, what does the wounded body of Christ have to teach us about all the wounded bodies in our community? How will Christ open our minds, as the minds of the disciples were opened, to understand their place, our place in relation to those broken bodies? What is the Good News here?

First, John's beautiful message in his Epistle reminds us that we are children of God; and this status is not an achievement, it is a gift from God to us.

"See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God."

We are welcomed into the family of God out of abundant, overflowing Love and that Love is transforming us! The thing is, while we and all creation are being transformed, we also still live

in a world that is broken, that is full of violence and greed - what John calls "lawlessness." In the midst of the abundant Love that has called us "family," some of God's other beloved children are living under bridges and in the medians of our roads. They are experiencing in a particular way the lawlessness of our broken world.

The people living in encampments throughout Austin are our family. They are Children of God as surely as we are. Given that, can we tolerate our brothers and sisters being criminalized for being poor? Can we stand by while our family is punished for having no shelter, for lacking safety, for being hungry?

Jesus' post resurrection appearances have another message for us; When the risen Jesus appears to his followers it reminds us that our faith is incarnational. It is embodied. We believe that God came to us in a physical body and after Jesus ascended to heaven our physical bodies are now part of the Body of Christ, the church. We believe that the risen body of Christ had scars, reminders of suffering, and even with those scars was holy and beautiful.

We learn from Jesus as he revealed himself to his closest friends that physical experience comes before understanding - he ate with his disciples, they touched him. Then he helped them understand what his life and death and resurrection all meant. Our physical lives, our hunger and thirst, our gathering with others, need for safety and protection - these all matter to God. And as Children of God, the physical lives of others matter to God and should matter to us, too. This is our family. This is our Body.

When I see tents along the roadside and under bridges, I am tempted to see something ugly - poverty, trash, unwashed people. Yet there is a miracle under the highway. People with virtually nothing have found a way to do the most human thing of all: they have created a community to protect themselves and fend for each other in a hostile world.

Their bodies bear the scars of their suffering, and they are also holy and beautiful.

After the deep freeze in February, the people of St. Mark's donated an amazing amount of water and food to help families all over the city who suddenly had nothing and no way to get it. In addition to delivering supplies to apartments in East Austin, I decided to take a case of bottled water to a tent camp on Menchaca. When I arrived, hauling the water across several lanes of traffic, I talked to a couple of the guys living there. They didn't need the water, had plenty for themselves, they told me. But they offered to carry it across the street to share it. That's what their little community did. They shared whatever they had, just as you shared what you had.

What is true of our individual physical bodies is also true for our corporate, collective bodies - Christ's humanity and his bodily resurrection tells us that salvation is possible for creatures like us who are formed from the dust of the earth. Our present reality is a place where transformation can and does take place. It is possible and it happens for us, for those who are homeless, for everyone. The transformation available to us through Christ, available to us as Children of God, includes our families, our churches, our neighborhoods, cities and nation. We can, as individuals, commit to honoring the dignity and humanity of all other people. And we can as a community, as a city, commit to honoring their humanity, as well.

The way we each treat others one person at a time is important.
The way we treat whole groups of people is powerful.
We are equipped by the Love of Christ to show the rest of our community what that kind of Love looks like.

The last thing Jesus tells the disciples in the Gospel of Luke is, "You are witnesses to these things." After that, he ascends to the Father. From that point on, that is what the disciples do, they witness. That is how we are able to hear the message of Christ today, and how others will hear it from us. We witness.

We witness to the scars of a transformed, risen Christ. We have made a covenant to follow that Christ and share the good news that in Christ we embodied, flawed human beings have salvation. One of the ways we express this is by speaking of ourselves as the Body of Christ, this is the concept that everyone who follows Jesus is in some very real way part of the physical presence of Christ in the world today.

Jesus has not stopped showing us his wounds. The presence of the poor among us is a witness to us. We are called to minister to all our brothers and sisters. We are also called to heed their witness to us! See their scars, hear their stories of oppression. Believe in their redemption.

Sisters and brothers, the brokenness of the world and the wounded-ness of our bodies is hard to see. It is overwhelming, it is confusing. What can we do? It is still Easter for us today. We are Easter people. Where is our hope in this broken and wounded world? Our hope is that in Jesus, God came to be with us and knows exactly what the wounds of human beings feel like. And the fact that Jesus' resurrected body still carried his wounds tells us that there is no experience of pain or shame or violence or loneliness that will keep us from God's Love.

This is true of every-body. All human bodies, in all our variety and all our experiences are loved by God. Every-body is a Child of God. Therefore, recognize the Child of God in every-body you meet. Claim them all as your family, even when you cannot see them.

Our hope is that all followers of Jesus are witnesses of his pain and our pain, of his humanity and our humanity, of his Love and our Love. Listen to the witness of the people in our community who bear the wounds of violence, misuse of power, and indifference. Listen to the witness of the beloved members of our family who have no shelter, pay attention to their injuries, their suffering. They are reflecting to you not only the brokenness of the world we live in, they are showing us where and how transformation can take place.

God has done something amazing for us:
Called us Children of God
Made us family
Granted us Peace
Fashioned us into the Body of Christ

Now, YOU are witnesses of these things.

AMEN.