

## Flesh and Bone

Luke 24:36b-43

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Philip Martin tells this story:

"I'll never forget the time we took our young daughters to Washington, D.C., for a short trip and of all the things they saw there, the teeth and bones probably fascinated them more than anything else." Sounds like some of the kids I know...

Forget the monuments, he said. Forget the White House, the Capitol Building, the giant statue of Lincoln. Forget the Metro and the train rides around the city. Forget the marvelous dresses of the first ladies. All of those things paled in comparison to the mummy exhibit and the early human exhibit in the Museum of Natural History.

"When we got to those exhibits their eyes lit up with curiosity and they had a thousand questions. Fossils and replicas of the 'cave people' captivated one of them, and the funeral practices of ancient Egypt entranced the other. If it had not been for the glass of the display case, I guarantee you that my two little girls would have picked up those old teeth and bones and held them in their hands" ("Third Sunday of Easter [Year B]," *A Sermon for Every Sunday*, April 18, 2021).

In our scripture reading this morning, *Jesus* is the exhibit — and there's no glass display case to keep people from touching him. In fact, he invites it. "Touch me and see," he says, offering himself up to them as if his flesh and bone are like fossils to be turned over in their hands.

In the story that comes just before this one — the one where an incognito Jesus meets a couple of disciples on the road to Emmaus and then vanishes at the very moment of they recognize him — in that story, the risen Jesus is elusive. They don't recognize him by his appearance. They don't recognize him by his voice or his words. They don't recognize him until he blesses and breaks bread at the supper table. But, even then, he vanishes before he eats anything. And they never once touch him.

But in this story, the disciples know who Jesus is *immediately* — which is why they think he's a ghost. They know what Jesus looks like. And they know that he's supposed to be dead. So when he shows up, they're terrified that he's come back to haunt them. Isn't that precisely what ghosts do? Come back to haunt those who have betrayed them?

And not only do they immediately recognize him, but he offers them his hands and his feet as physical evidence. "Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is me. Touch me and see. Ghosts don't have flesh and bones." (Lk. 24:39).

It's interesting that Luke doesn't mention the wounds on Jesus' hands and feet. In John, Jesus explicitly tells Thomas to touch his scars (20:27), but not in Luke. In Luke, there is no mention of any scars. Jesus just says, "Touch me... feel my flesh and bones."

Typical Middle Eastern dress for men was a long tunic that would have covered his whole body except his feet and hands, two body parts whose boney structure also happens to be clearly discernible. I suppose that if there were such things as ghosts, they could have wounds just as easily as not. But flesh and bones? Skin and veins? Muscle and tendon and knuckles that crack? Those belong to real people.

And it's interesting that Jesus uses that phrase — flesh and bones. "Flesh and bones" don't show up together all that often in scripture, but they do in one important place. God had been trying (rather unsuccessfully) to create a helpmate for Adam. But then God put Adam to sleep and took one of his ribs. And from that rib God created Eve. And when Adam woke and saw Eve for the first time, what did he say?

"This, at last, is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh" (Gen. 2:23).

In alluding to that story, maybe Jesus is saying something similar to us: "Son of God or not, I am part of humankind. I am flesh and bone."

But in case his "flesh and bones" do not offer strong enough evidence for his disciples, Jesus tries a different approach. "What's for dinner?" he asks.

Eating is an essential part of being alive. It is so essential that hospitals won't discharge you until you can eat something more solid than Jello and pudding. That's because they know that you are only safe to leave their supervision if your digestive tract is functioning. If you can't eat, you don't live. And if you don't eat, then you are not alive.

So, he asks them, "Have you got anything to eat?"

They hand him a piece of broiled fish, and he chews it and swallows it right there in front of them.

Jesus in "flesh and bone." Jesus eating fish. Why is Luke so bent on making sure that we understand that the risen Jesus has a *physical* body — one that can be touched, one that can hunger? Why remove the display case and let the disciples handle the exhibit?

One reason might be that in that day and time, there was a popular Greek philosophy that claimed that the human soul was immortal and merely imprisoned by our flesh and blood bodies. Many Christians still believe this — they believe that at death the soul floats off to heaven like a helium balloon, and the body, which was just a shell, stays behind.

But the thing is — every resurrection appearance by Jesus is a *bodily* resurrection.

If the disciples are looking for the risen Jesus to be some wispy spiritual being, or some philosophical concept, or a ghost, what they get instead is the Lord of heaven and earth chewing on tilapia in Galilee.

You know, much of Jesus' earthly ministry was spent touching people no one was supposed to touch — the blind, the sick, the demon-possessed, the dead. On occasion, he was known to stop his sermons mid-sentence in order to hold children in his lap and bless them. In another instance, he reached out and touched a leper — a condition so feared that those who suffered it were banished from their villages.

For Jesus, touch was more than a means of healing others. It was a means of restoring them. You see, human touch is like eating a piece of fish — it is absolutely to what it means to be human.

But in these resurrection stories, it's Jesus' turn to be touched. Over and over again, he says, "Touch me and see." Why is that? Why are the tables turned?

Stephen Montgomery explains it like this:

"There was an article I read in a magazine a while back that began with the words, 'Now that I have cancer, it's touching time.' The article was written by a Presbyterian minister who was diagnosed with cancer who noticed that now there seemed to be permission for people to touch him.

He said, 'It's funny that a broken body should somehow be more touchable than one that's whole.' Lifelong friends with whom he had only ever shaken hands were now hugging him.

The pastor made the point that in all the Bible there was only one story about Jesus being touched while he was alive. Now, Jesus touched others to be sure. And there was a woman who touched his garment. There was a woman who washed his feet with her faith. But this minister said that the one time someone reached out to touch Jesus was to betray him with a kiss.

He concludes the article, 'We seem able to touch one another in our brokenness in ways that we never can in wholeness. God likes to use broken things — broken vessels, broken bread, broken bodies, even relationships that are broken with a kiss. My body and spirit have been broken by cancer. That means it's ok to touch me. I'm thankful'" ("It's Touching Time," *Day 1*, April 19, 2015).

"Look at my hands and feet..." says Jesus, "Touch me and see... feel my flesh and bones."

You see, his resurrected body first had to be broken. And broken bodies are things we all eventually share. All our bodies, no matter our effort, will begin to break down — to be broken. "Bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh." Jesus is one of us.

Philip Yancey tells this story of Dr. Paul Brand, which took place while he was working with leprosy patients in Vellore, India. He says:

“At the time, Brand and his workers were among the few in the area who would touch or closely approach a person with Hansen’s disease — townspeople quarantined them. Brand slipped in late to a patients’ gathering, sitting on the mat at the edge of an open courtyard. The air was heavy with combined odors of crowding bodies, poverty, stale spices, treated bandages.

The patients insisted on a few words from Dr. Brand, and he reluctantly agreed. He stood for a moment empty of ideas, looking at the patients before him. His eyes were drawn to their hands, dozens of them, most pulled inward in the familiar “leprosy claw-hand,” some with no fingers, some with a few stumps. Many patients sat on their hands or otherwise hid them from view.

‘I am a hand surgeon,’ he began. ‘So when I meet people, I can’t help looking at their hands. The palm reader claims he can tell your future by looking at your hands. I can tell your past. For instance, I can tell what your trade has been by the position of the calluses and the condition of the nails. I can tell a lot about your character; I love hands.’

He paused and looked at the eager faces, ‘How I would love to have had the chance to meet Christ and study his hands! But knowing what he was like, I can almost picture them, feel them.’

He then wondered aloud what it would have been like to meet Christ and study his hands. He traced the hands of Christ, beginning with infancy when his hands were small, helpless, grasping. Then came the hands of the boy Jesus, clumsily holding a brush or stylus, trying to write his letters. Then the hands of Christ the carpenter — rough, gnarled, with broken fingernails and bruises from working with saw and hammer.

Then there were the hands of Christ the physician, the healer. Compassion and sensitivity seems to radiate from them, so much so that when he touched people they could feel something of the divine spirit coming through. Christ touched the blind, the diseased, the needy.

‘Then,’ continued Dr. Brand, ‘there were his crucified hands. It hurts me to think of a nail being driven through the center of my hand, because I know what goes on there, the tremendous complex of tendons and nerves and blood vessels and muscles. It’s impossible to drive a spike through its center without crippling it. The thought of those healing hands being crippled reminds me of... how in that act he identified himself with all the broken and crippled people in our world.’

The effect on those leprosy patients — all outcasts, all broken, all crippled — was electrifying.

Brand continued. ‘And then there were his resurrected hands. One of the things I find most astounding is that, though we think of the future life as something perfected, when Christ appeared to his disciples, he still had his scars. Why did he want to keep

the wounds of his humanity? Maybe... Maybe he wanted to be forever *one with us*" (*Bread and Wine*, 319-322).

"Look at my hands and feet; touch them and see... feel my flesh and bone." It is an invitation for him to be one with us, and for us to be one with him.

Did Jesus' proof of his existence work?

To be honest, it's not quite clear that it did. The disciples reactions definitely change. At first, they were startled and terrified. Jesus mentions that they have doubts in their hearts. But even after they had the chance to touch his hands – to feel that he's made of flesh and bone – Luke says, "in their joy, they were disbelieving and still wondering..." (24:41).

Isn't that a good description of how many of us feel on Easter – a mix of joy and wonder and disbelief?

In fact, nowhere in this story is there any mention ever made of the disciples' faith, or that they change their minds about his substance. And the thing is, Jesus doesn't coerce them to believe. Neither does he exclude or belittle those who can't or don't. He just offers himself and says, "Touch me and see; ghosts don't have flesh and bone."

And maybe that is a good description for the church's ministry in this world. The principal task of our faith and life together is not to be arguers for the existence of God, but a community whose presence and activity puts "flesh and bones" to the presence of Christ in this world.

Friends, at our worst, the church is like a display case – removed from the world; guarded; here to be seen, but not touched; full of beliefs, but not practice; full of relics, but not life.

But at our best, we *become* the body of Christ in this world. We put flesh and bones to his words. We eat together. We share with one another. We serve others together. We love one another. We become his body.

We stop trying to *prove* the resurrection, and we *become* the resurrection.

The late great Baptist preacher, Clarence Jordan, has said it like this: "The crowning evidence that Jesus is alive is not a vacant grave, but a spirit-filled fellowship. Not a rolled away stone, but a carried away church."

That's because a carried away church gives flesh and bone to the risen Christ. It makes the hope of the resurrection tangible. It gives his body hands and feet again.

Don't you want to be that? I do. But it will only happen if you want it, too.

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ... For we are the body of Christ, and individually members of it” (1 Cor. 12:12, 27).

Amen.