

“MY HANDS AND MY FEET”

Luke 24:36b-48

A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Third Sunday of Easter, April 26, 2009, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

Focus Texts

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’ They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, ‘Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.’ And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, ‘Have you anything here to eat?’ They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.

Then he said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.’

A member of the church sent me an intriguing article this week. Some of you may have seen it. It is an account in last Sunday’s *New York Times* in which the rock star Bono describes his experience of worshipping in a small, village church the previous Sunday – which of course was Easter.¹

Now for those of you who are as uninitiated in the ways of popular culture as I am, in addition to being a rock star and celebrity, Bono is one of the world’s leading humanitarians and philanthropists.

- He co-founded the organization called ONE, which has helped lead many nations to significantly reduce poverty and disease.
- As a humanitarian, Bono has drawn enormous, bipartisan respect in our country and across religious, national, racial lines throughout the world.

In the article, Bono explains the significance of Easter for him.

[Easter is] a transcendent moment [he says]... a rebirth I always seem to need...I come to lowly church halls and lofty cathedrals for what purpose? ...To check...my soul. ...Religion is where I soul-search.

Bono then goes on to connect his “soul search” with his actions in the world. “Redemption is not just a spiritual term,” he writes, “it’s an economic concept.”

At the turn of the millennium [he continues], the debt cancellation campaign, inspired by the Jewish concept of Jubilee, aimed to give the poorest countries a fresh start.

- Thirty-four million more children in Africa are now in school in large part because their governments used money freed up by debt relief.
- This redemption was not an end to economic slavery [he says], but it was a more hopeful beginning for many.
- And to the many [he concludes], not the lucky few, is surely where any soul-searching must lead us.

To summarize: Bono is drawn to Easter to search his own soul. His soul-searching contains a markedly ethical, even economic, component, leading him to combat poverty, AIDS, and illiteracy on a global scale. “To the many, not the lucky few, is...where [his] soul-searching [leads].”

¹ Bono, “It’s 2009. Do You Know Where Your Soul Is?” in *The New York Times* 4/29/09.

II.

Bono's article is not the only thing I have read in recent weeks concerning Easter.

A week ago Thursday, Maggie and I drove to the mountains in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, where we joined the small family from which I come, a dozen or so of my brother's friends, his two children with fresh pictures his infant grandchildren, for me to conduct his wedding to a woman to whom he has engaged for several months.

Maggie and I went up a day early, enjoyed the beautiful drive from here to there, and the views from a mountain cottage once we arrived.

We also took along books, an occupational hazard for ministers. We happened to be reading separate books each of which had telling passages about the resurrection of the body.

Maggie was reading a book by a Jewish scholar, Claudia Setzer, called *Resurrection of the Body in Early Judaism and Early Christianity*². Setzer makes a fascinating argument:

The resurrection [of the body] condenses a worldview [she writes]. Certain other beliefs adhere to it and are mentioned along with it:

- The belief in God's power and involvement in human affairs
- A concern for ultimate justice
- A belief in providence.

Setzer quotes another scholar who claims that belief in the resurrection of the body was strongest among "disenfranchised classes of people who could not abide foreign domination."³

In other words, this scholar finds belief in bodily resurrection was more widespread among early Jews and Christians who yearned for material rescue in the world.

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Now the book I read was easier. It was by Tom Long, a longtime friend and professor of preaching at Emory.⁴

Mounting a defense for two traditional Christian beliefs – the incarnation of Christ and the resurrection of the body – Tom argues for the essential "body-ness" of Christian faith:

...the spiritual life is not to be achieved by transcending this world and ascending into some ethereal immaterial realm of the spirit [he writes].

To the contrary, *this* is the world that God has made, *this* is the creation God called "very good," and it is in *this* world that God has chosen to dwell.

The spiritual life for a Christian is not rising above place and circumstance [he says].

The irony of Christian spiritual life is that it is always and in every way material.

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In our passage for today Jesus emphasizes to startled the disciples the *bodily* nature of his resurrection --

Look at my hands and my feet;

² Claudia Setzer, *Resurrection of the Body in Early Judaism and Early Christianity* (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2004), 44-45.

³ Alan Segal, *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 102; quoted in Setzer 45.

⁴ Thomas G. Long, *Preaching From Memory To Hope* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 96-97.

See that it is I myself.
Touch me and see;
For a ghost does not have flesh and bones
that I have.

As Tom concludes: “Jesus Christ...did not come as an idea or as a principle or as a spiritual experience but...‘in the flesh.’”

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Let’s review. What we have seen so far is

- A celebrity rock star whose humanitarian deeds flow from the renewal of his soul at Easter
- A scholar who claims that in early Judaism and Christianity, belief in the resurrection of the body led to belief in the power of God to act in human affairs to bring justice
- Another scholar who claims that the resurrection of the body leads Christian spirituality to be “in every way material.”

III.

I see a slight but important difference between these sources.

At least based on this one article, Bono poignantly describes the source of his humanitarianism in the renewal of his soul at Easter, but he does not appear to tie that renewal to what Easter celebrates: namely, the resurrection of the body.

By contrast, the two scholars assert that belief in the resurrection of the body has, can, and should lead Christians and Jews to the type of concern and effort in the world Bono exhibits.

Now in his defense, Bono may be like many of us:

- Maybe he has never had a minister or priest lead him to see the connection between resurrection of the body and the bodies he so aptly serves.
- Maybe he doesn’t understand the resurrection of the body and figures it’s not worth the time it takes to figure it out.
- Maybe in a scientific age, he is simply skeptical of it.
- Or maybe he is turned off by Christians who seem to treat the resurrection of the body as more of a litmus test for determining who “is Christian” and who “is not” than as an empowering motivation for serving human beings.

I do not know why Bono doesn’t make this direct connection between all he does for bodies and the resurrection of Christ’s body that lies at the heart of the Easter celebration that renews his soul.

But as a minister, I am not shy about making that connection. In fact, I feel compelled to do it. I feel compelled to preach and teach that the resurrection of Christ *in the body* impels us to the kind of action on behalf of the broken and bruised bodies of the world that Bono exhibits.

As Tom Long says: The resurrection of the body reminds us that Christian spiritual life is

- hassling with *these* particular people who make up my actual life
- and being in *these* relationships
- and raising *these* children
- and picking up *this* plow
- and being a good steward of *this* money and *that* land
- and suffering through *this* loss
- and rejoicing over *these* mercies
- and trying to live in peace with *those* neighbors
- and dwelling in *this* community

- and dealing with *that* political wrangle
- and confessing *this* creed
- and building up *these* institutions.

It is in the “this-ness” of our lives on earth, in their particularity, in their embodied character, that we find the truest spirituality we can know.

Armed with the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, we experience the renewal of our souls when we join God’s action in the world on behalf of other bodies.

IV.

So I came to the church early yesterday morning to finish the sermon. Unlike most Saturdays, I was dressed in a black suit, white shirt, maroon tie, for I had a memorial service to conduct and I didn’t want to go home and change clothes before it.

When I pulled up in the parking lot, I met a dozen or so of our members, all dressed in jeans, t-shirt, tennis shoes. They were getting ready to paint and repair a house as part of the Rebuilding Alexandria program in which we participate. They razzed me about how I was dressed and I denied that I had spiffed up just to get out of work.

But all kidding and fashion concerns aside:

A dozen or so people,
 Working on a Saturday morning
 To improve the home of someone
 Who doesn’t have any other means
 For such improvement,
 Engage in the renewal of the soul Bono describes,
 And bear witness to the resurrection of the body
 That is central to everything we do or say,
 Preach, teach, or sing in this place,
 The resurrection of the body
 That is the reason for our very being as a church
 The central event and belief of our faith,
 That leads us to serve other bodies on the earth,
 And even the earth itself.

Amen.