

“Breathe”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus,
concerning John 20:19-31; 1 Peter 1:3-9; Psalm 16
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco,
on April 23, 2017

I was especially struck this week by the Psalm reading, a portion of which is quoted near the beginning of your worship guide. The psalmist attempts to capture in words the experience of receiving life in God. He writes in v. 9, “Therefore my heart is glad and my soul rejoices. My body also rests secure” (Psalm 16:9).

My body also rests secure.

Whether or not you are an Easter skeptic, let’s talk about the bodily resurrection of Christ and the significance of a risen body as one of our primary Christian images and central Christian stories.

The Bible goes to great lengths to make it clear that Jesus had a body, that *God* in Jesus had a body—both before his resurrection and after. God did not just vaguely appear like a vapor or a vision. God entered the world via a woman’s womb. God’s arrival started in a uterus, dependent on one ordinary umbilical cord. God came out bloody and screaming and tiny and helpless. Jesus had a body.

When God walked this earth, God ate and drank with people. Jesus touched the people he healed, he held children in his arms, his feet were rinsed with a woman’s tears and wiped with a woman’s hair. Jesus took a towel and a basin in his own two hands, got down on his knees and washes his disciple’s feet. Jesus wept. Our Scriptures are clear—Jesus had a body.

In agony Jesus prayed in the garden and sweat drops of blood. They tore his clothes and lashed his body. They spit on his face and drove nails through his hands. They say he was thirsty. The breath went out of him; they needed a place to lay the body. On a Sunday the women came to anoint his body with spices, but the tomb was empty. The women knew something was up because Jesus had a body, but the body wasn’t there.

When he first appeared to the disciples inside that locked room, they touched his hands. They touched his side. Thomas wasn’t there though. He hadn’t seen the empty, body-less tomb. He did not touch the wounded side. It was very hard for him to believe in a resurrection, and who can blame him? He knew Jesus had a body—he’d seen him *die*. Tradition calls him doubting Thomas, but I think that’s unfair. The other disciples had a bodily encounter with the risen Christ—why shouldn’t Thomas? Witnessing a gruesome death is not a thing one easily forgets. I think it’s totally fair that Thomas needed to see the body.

In our western society, we’ve tended to devalue the body in favor of the mind, and this is often true in terms of religious experience. We’re expected to convince our brains that this is all true, with or without physical evidence, regardless of whether our gut has any questions or objections. Even if we do engage our questions, we’re inclined to filter them through the intellect rather than admit we have might some *feelings* about all this. In the West, we are predisposed to view

Thomas as a weakling because he needed to see and touch the risen Christ before he could believe. We are also predisposed to judge ourselves as harshly as we do Thomas.

In my own life, I've been disconnected from my body for a long time, and interestingly it has been my journey with PTSD that has been teaching me to reconnect and value my body once more. I've been learning a lot about PTSD lately, especially the ways traumatic experiences can get lodged the body. One of the world's leading researchers on trauma recovery, Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, said this, "Trauma is much more than a story about something that happened long ago. The emotions and physical sensations that were imprinted during the trauma are experienced not as memories but as disruptive physical reactions to the present."ⁱ In other words, trauma can get lodged inside you not as a coherent memory but as physical sensations, such that your body will keep responding as if the threat persists long after the crisis is over. This is why, for example, a veteran might experience fireworks as a war zone or an abuse survivor might jerk away from a simple touch as if being assaulted. Your body still experiences the trauma *as if it were unfolding in present time*, regardless of whether your cognitive brain knows that it's only a firework show or a hug from your friend.

Thus recovery from PTSD must involve being able to return to a visceral sense of safety. You can't get yourself there just by thinking about it; your body has to experience it on a physical level.

Interestingly, while most people will have a traumatic experience at some point in their lives, we know that not everyone develops PTSD—post-traumatic stress disorder. Whether or not you develop PTSD has nothing to do with how tough you are or how healthy you are. Rather, your chances of developing PTSD after trauma are strongly influenced by agency and whether your body is able to take action in the midst of crisis. Van der Kolk writes, "Being able to move and do something to protect oneself is a critical factor in determining whether or not a horrible experience will leave long-lasting scars."ⁱⁱ

He tells the story about a five-year-old boy who witnessed a plane crashing into the World Trade Center in 2011 from less than 1500 feet away. He and his family were among the tens of thousands that ran for their lives. Fortunately his family made it to safety. The next day the little boy drew a picture of the plane crash, the tower, the ball of fire, but there was something else in his picture too. Van der Kolk asked him, "What's that black circle at the foot of the buildings?" The boy answered, "A trampoline. So that the next time when people have to jump, they will be safe."ⁱⁱⁱ

Within twenty-four hours of witnessing a massive horror, a five-year-old was able to use his imagination to start processing what he had seen, and he was able to imagine a different future. Why was he able to do that while other people remain trapped reliving their trauma over and over? He was able to begin the process of moving on because in the moment of crisis he was able to take an active role by running away, thus becoming an agent in his own rescue. When he reached safety, the alarm bells in his brain and body settled down.

However, trauma doesn't always allow for agency. Sometimes people are prevented from taking an active role, and it isn't their fault. Helplessness or immobilization keeps them from utilizing

their stress hormones to defend themselves. When that happens, the hormones are pumping, but the actions they are supposed to activate are thwarted. Without action, stress stays active in the body, and the body can remain stuck in a state of hyper-vigilance.

What does this have to do with Thomas and the bodily resurrection of Christ? I'm not saying Thomas had PTSD—we have no real way of knowing that—but what I am saying is that Jesus had a body and it mattered. What I am saying is that Thomas NEEDED to touch Jesus' resurrected body with his own traumatized one and feel viscerally that resurrection was true. Thomas needed to take action, to be an agent of his own belief, not a mere passive recipient of the news. He needed to become a participant in the resurrection story, to enter it with his own two feet and his own two eyes. There may be times in life when we are prevented from being active, bodily participants in what is unfolding before us, but whether or not we are able to do so, the longing to participate is still a legitimate need that we all have.

When Jesus tells Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe," I don't believe he is in any way critiquing Thomas' faith as too weak or meager. I think Jesus is literally blessing those who will not get to experience what Thomas is experiencing, because Jesus knows they will need the extra help. For those of us who do not get to see God face-to-face, finding our way to belief is even more challenging than it was for Thomas. We have to invent new ways to become participants in the resurrection story: whether it's carrying flowers to the cross or ringing bells during the alleluias, whether it's helping someone to get back on their feet or taking appropriate steps in one's own journey towards healing. If we want to experience bodily contact with resurrection, we have to be more creative than Thomas had to.

If we long to experience resurrection viscerally—not just intellectually—it is not because we are so full of doubt but because we are so full of the desire to engage in a real and meaningful way. The longing we have for proof of God in our midst is not evidence of our doubt so much as it is an indication of our need to be held and to be comforted and to be loved by something or someone greater than ourselves. Our longing for physical proof is more than doubt; it is our hunger for authentic and vibrant connection.

Can you imagine if Thomas had stifled his desire, his need to touch the hands and side of Jesus? Can you imagine if Thomas had wanted to impress the other disciples with his immediate and unfiltered certitude about the resurrection? If Thomas put on a show of cocky instead of being honest and real, would he have missed out on this truly remarkable and healing experience of physically greeting his Jesus this side of the grave?

When the other disciples told him the good news, Thomas answered from his grief, as he should have. "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails in his hands and my hand in his side, I will not believe." Thomas was honest and vulnerable in a way that kept him open to new experiences and healing encounters.

Did you know deep breathing is one of the most effective ways to calm the body? In that room with the disciples, Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit. It is no wonder that receiving the Holy Spirit was a bodily experience. It is no wonder that the way we reenact the reception of the Holy Spirit today is a bodily experience of baptism. It's no wonder that you have to hold your breath as you

go under the waters, or that it can feel like a brief return to the amniotic sac in which you were first born or that you emerge gasping for breath, dripping wet, your robes heavy with the feeling of immersion.

While we're not planning to revive this ancient tradition at Lake Shore, I think it is worth noting that they used to baptize people naked. Naked baptism sounds bizarre to us today, but it was also unashamedly bodily. It was one of the ways God's people said, "I need to see and feel it to believe it and to keep believing it." It was a way to experience viscerally that they were safe, that we are being carried in the womb of God, that we are accepted and loved just exactly as we are when we enter the waters. Remember that the Hebrew word for compassion comes from the word for "womb." In baptism we are wholeheartedly received by the God who designed and birthed us and who now births us again.

If you need to feel it viscerally that God is for you and you are safe with God—that God's not going to zap you or strike you or reject you, for example—if you need that assurance, it doesn't mean your faith is weak. It means that you are real, and that the wounds you have seen and felt are real, and that you are truly a child of God's own creation, in need of breath.

Lately I keep talking about entering the biblical story, but I don't mean entering it with your mind. I mean I want you to enter it with your body. That may seem impossible, but even if all you do when you come to worship is *breathe*, that could be enough. As they say, there's a Spirit in this air. If you inhale deeply you might experience something of what the disciples experienced in that room with their resurrected Jesus. If you exhale like Jesus, you might become breath for someone else without even knowing it.

One of the ways the church experiences the resurrection of Christ is by being together. We do not have his literal body with us, but we have *this* body, the body of believers who would otherwise find it hard to believe if we didn't have each other to look at and walk beside. If we didn't all show up in the same room week after week, sometimes with our raw and recent wounds openly exposed, it would be so much harder for me to trust viscerally that Christ is here and Christ is alive. You are my proof, and I am grateful. My heart is glad and my spirit rejoices. My body also rests secure.

Take a deep breath with me. Feel it in your very cells . . . your body is secure. Not because the world is safe and death is avoidable, but because God is good, present, and alive, and you are loved. It's okay if you can't quite believe it. Just breathe. Amen.

ⁱ Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (Viking Penguin 2014), 204.

ⁱⁱ van der Kolk, 55.

ⁱⁱⁱ van der Kolk, 52