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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
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1 Peter 1:3-9, John 20:19-31  
The Resurrection of the Body

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text this morning is that dramatic scene when Jesus stands before Thomas and instructs him to touch the wounds in his body:

<sup>27</sup>Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing.”

For me, there are always two great themes for preaching on this Easter story: One is the resurrection of the body — the good, ole body. The other is Doubting Thomas. For this go-round, I mean to begin with Doubting Thomas and then turn to the resurrection of the body.

## **DOUBTING THOMAS**

Let’s begin, then, by saying a few words about Doubting Thomas. Two emotions come to me when I think about the man: sadness at what almost befell him, and relief that it did not. The man was in danger of falling into unbelief, which I count a great sadness in life.

Thomas disbelieved the apostolic witness. You and I have nothing higher to begin with than that: we have the words of the apostles that Jesus, though dead, is alive again for evermore. We have received that message from the apostles, faithfully handed down to us through the centuries, and we have believed it. But Thomas disbelieved. And in a way, I hold it against him — even more than I would hold it against somebody in our own generation, because he had access to the apostles face to face, while the rest of us have to rely upon the chain of tradition since then. I mean, Thomas could look Simon Peter in the eyes, and see that clearly something had happened to him and to the other disciples. He could see that Simon Peter was not kidding about the resurrection — not joshing him about having seen the Lord. Thomas had the advantage of being in the very presence of apostles stirred by the Holy Spirit, for Jesus had breathed the Spirit upon them. Thomas occupied a privileged position compared to us in being in the presence of the inspired apostles, yet he did not believe. He took his stand. He declared that he would not believe unless he could have tangible proof acceptable to him. You might call him a scientist. I call him simply a man on the verge of disaster.

The good thing about Thomas is that he did not abandon the apostolic community. He continued to come to church until one day — and not too long afterwards — he at last came to faith for himself.

Consider that for a stretch of a week, Thomas was among the apostles, but not as they were. They were believers in the resurrection of Jesus, but he was not. By rights, he could have left in a huff. We do not know what his profession was before Jesus called him to be a disciple — whether he was a fisherman or a tax collector or whatever. But whatever his old job was, when he told the other disciples that he did not believe in the resurrection of Jesus, he could have left their company and gone back to his job.

## **WE HUMANS ARE BUILT FOR FAITH**

But this is what is on my heart to say to you: If Thomas had done that, his life would have been poorer for it. In a few minutes I will do the best I can to explain at least part of this. I will not be satisfied with my explanation, for it my personal testimony I am trying to share, and sometimes it is hard to talk about love. And I love Jesus. Maybe your parents can do a better job than I do, or other grey-haired saints of the church can give their testimony that might help you along. So, I'll try that in a minute or so.

Meanwhile, there is a preliminary matter that might be helpful to you. It concerns the reality that we human beings are built for faith, one way or another. So, I believe about Thomas that if he had left the apostles and returned to his old way of life, he would not have been able to boast that he had done the *rational* thing, for when it comes to Jesus, any of us lives by faith. We live either by the faith that Jesus is alive or by the faith that he is dead as a doornail. Lots of people in this world could easily say that Jesus is dead. They do not believe in Jesus, and do not worry about it all. They believe in other gods or no god or science or simply in some good state of themselves. But here is the interesting thing: Neither conviction about Jesus — either that he lives or is dead as doornail — can be proved by mathematics or logic, and the empirical evidence is hard to assess. In fact, it is notoriously hard to prove a negative. It is hard to prove that Jesus is *not* risen when the apostles and so many people who have lived for him ever since say he is. If you found his bones in a grave somewhere, for me that would count as proof, but many a century has passed since then, and no one particularly makes that claim, as far as I know.

Let me break off here on this matter of the inescapability of faith when it comes to Jesus and return to my main point: It would have been really sad if Thomas had left the apostles and gone home declaring that Jesus is dead. For if Jesus is dead, then a lot of our hopes and our most noble efforts are in vain. I hope to see my parents again, for example. They were awfully good people. They lived for Jesus and I believe that Jesus will let me see them again. But I could not hope this if Jesus is dead. If all there is to this world are ultimately meaningless

sequences of biochemical and physical events, that is far, far away from the hope of God casting death out of the world and wiping the tears from every eye.

Your best efforts — including you young people of the Mattawan Singers — your best hopes and dreams and your best efforts might well require that you discipline yourself and sacrifice much for the sake of love, which is an entirely rational thing to do if Jesus is alive and on your side, but not so rational and much harder to sustain if you have nothing but mechanical determinism in this world.

So, that's my first theme: I don't want any of you to lose your faith in Jesus. Life will be poorer for you if you do. And if, for a while, you are not sure of your faith, then do the good thing that Thomas did do: he hung around with the apostles long enough until one day he too was able to make the good confession about Jesus: My Lord and my God!

For one of the good things about faith in Jesus is that we can look at one another and look at ourselves and see something precious. We can see people that way — body, spirit, and mind, lock, stock, and barrel. We can see something of ultimate value in all reality, so precious that Jesus was willing to die us, body, spirit, and mind altogether.

## THE BODY

So, this leads me to my other great theme of this Sunday: the resurrection of the body. Here let begin by noting and rejoicing in the remarkably *physical* nature of Easter. Jesus is not a memory. He does not live on in the world as a memory. Memories can be nice. They can comfort, they can inspire. But one thing they cannot do is tell fisherman to cast their nets on the other side of the boat and then command the fish to come swarming into that net to fill it to the brim (John 21:6). And memories cannot stand before you and invite you to touch their wounds and place your hand in the side where a spear has been thrust (today's lesson, John 20). And memories cannot listen to your prayers and accept your good deeds and use them all for the building of God's kingdom where there is no more death nor dying and where God wipes away the tears from every eye.

Jesus did not rise up from the grave as a memory nor as an idea or a principle — say, a principle of love or sacrifice or anything like that. You can't rush to a principle and throw your arms around it the way Mary Magdalene started to throw her arms around Jesus on that first Easter morning.

Jesus arose as a person, with both mind and spirit and *body*. It is a very interesting body — what theologians call a “glorified body” — but it is a body nonetheless. It is glorified in that Jesus can pass softly through a locked door and suddenly appear in the midst of his disciples, yet once he is there, he has a good, old-fashioned body that be touched, whose wounds that can be probed, who can cook breakfast for his disciples and eat it with them (John 21:9).

Likewise, when we recite the Creed this morning and we declare that we believe in the “resurrection of the body,” we are speaking of *ourselves*. We are not

going to live on as memories or ideas, but as bodies who can hug each other and clap each other on the back and be delighted to see one another again.

So, that's what I want to talk about now: our good, ole bodies.

## **TREASURE IN EARTHEN VESSELS**

To do this, I want to borrow a sequence of words from Saint Paul. In the apostle they have a more narrow and specific meaning that I am going to use, but that's okay. I will explain that as best I can and then go ahead and enjoy this sequence of words anyway. They come from Saint Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, Chapter Four. The words go this way:

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels... (2 Corinthians 4:7, KJV)

In their context in Saint Paul's letter, the apostle is referring to his ministry. That is the treasure of which he speaks. The resurrected Christ has entrusted an apostolic ministry of proclaiming the faith and building up the church. When Saint Paul says that he has this treasure "in earthen vessels," he means that he is nothing special. He is not eloquent, as his opponents were quick to point out. His letters "are weighty," they say, but his personal presence is unimpressive:

For his letters, say they, are weighty and powerful; but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible. (2 Corinthians 10:10, KJV)

In the city of Corinth, inheritor of the ancient and proud Greek civilization, these words about Saint Paul are thought to be a disaster. If he is not a powerful speaker, well-trained in rhetoric, with a persuasive and melodic voice, well, he is no account. And Paul knows that. But he is content to be no account because he wants his ministry to win souls to Christ not because of Paul's eloquence but because of the beauty of Christ and his worthiness of being followed.

So, Saint Paul says that he has a treasure, but it is in an "earthen vessel."

What I want to do is to borrow that sequence of words and use them to speak of you and of your body. My theme is this: *You* are a treasure, including your body. Each one of us, young or old, handsome or plain, can proudly apply Saint Paul's words to ourselves: We have this treasure in earthen vessels.

So, each one of us can proudly say about ourselves and about other people: I might be an earthen vessel, but I am a treasure! He or she might be an earthen vessel, but he is a treasure! She is a treasure!

## **A DATE FOR GOMER**

To develop this theme, let me begin by referring to an episode in the old Andy Griffith show. You young folks from Mattawan probably do not know that show,

since it began in 1960, and that's a long time ago now. But all eight years of the show are available on Netflix, and Carol and I are having fun working our way through them, half-hour show at a time.

To set the stage a little, Andy Griffith is the sheriff of a small town called Mayberry, North Carolina. It's the kind of town I grew up in and maybe many of us grew up in. Andy has a deputy, Barney Fife, and Barney has a girlfriend named Thelma Lou. The particular episode I am referring to is called "A Date for Gomer."

Barney has to play matchmaker for Thelma Lou's visiting cousin, Mary Grace. Barney has to come up with a date for Mary Grace or else Thelma Lou refuses to go to the big Chamber of Commerce dance with Barney. The problem is that cousin Mary Grace is thought to be a homely looking girl. She looks fine to me, but in the story, she is thought to be very plain.

At last Barney and Andy come up with the idea of persuading the local gas station worker, Gomer Pyle, to be Mary Grace's date. Gomer has never met Mary Grace, and he is curious what she looks like:

Gomer	Is she purty?
Barney	Well, she's nice. Oh, yes, indeed, she's nice.

Gomer can't get another word out of Barney and Andy except that: she's nice.

So, the big night comes, they all meet at Thelma Lou's place, and suddenly Gomer goes dashing out the door. Thelma Lou and Andy's date, Helen, are very offended by this. They think Gomer has abandoned Mary Grace because she is not beautiful. They go off to the dance, leaving Mary Grace behind, but it does not work. They soon come home. But when they approach the house, they hear big band music playing on the record player, and when they open the door, they find Gomer and Mary Grace just dancing up a storm — legs and elbows flying all over the place, having fun. It turns out that Gomer had dashed out of the house because he had noticed that Thelma Lou and Helen had corsages, but Mary Grace did not. So he dashed off to get her one.

The thing about Gomer, in his simplicity and innocence, is that he can see the treasure that Mary Grace is. And because she is a treasure, so is her body. She deserves a corsage. She deserves to have fun dancing.

The doctrine of the resurrection of the body invites us to look at one another and to look at ourselves as treasures, mind, spirit, and body — every part of us. Some of us are getting older. If we ever had good looks, they have faded away by now. Some of us never had good looks. Some of us are old, some of us are young, facing a whole life ahead of us. Whoever we are, we have bodies and we should be proud of them and deck them out from time to time, because these bodies permit us to be for one another what we in fact are, what Jesus saw in us when he was willing to suffer and die on the cross for us: he saw us as treasures. Old and grey or young and strong, handsome or plain, healthy or in decline, Jesus sees each of us as treasures, and asks us to regard each other that way too.

I'll let Saint Paul have the last word about this:

For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body. (1 Corinthians 6:20, NRSV)

It is a body for which Jesus was willing to suffer and die, and to him belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.