

Luke 24:36b-48
April 15, 2018

“Seeing with Resurrection Eyes”

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Our Christian Ethics Course in Seminary was taught by Professor Enoch Oglesby. One day he invited a few students to travel from our school in the suburbs of St. Louis, Missouri, across the Mississippi River to East St. Louis, IL. Dr. Oglesby had set up a visit to Ms. Kathryn Mary Dunham. Ms. Dunham was a famous American dancer, choreographer, author, educator, and social activist. When she died in 2006 she was known as the “matriarch and queen mother of black dance.”

The year our class went Ms. Dunham was 83 years old and in the middle of a 47-day hunger strike to protest US policy toward Haitian Refugees at the time.

Driving through East St. Louis my classmates and I experienced a sense of fear being in such a crime ridden community. East St. Louis has a violent crime rate 548% higher than the average in Illinois, and 632% higher than the national average. The city is known as a place of poverty and crime, often described as looking like a war zone.

During the visit with Ms. Dunham we experienced her inspiration, her graciousness, her commitment, and I began to see her and the community in a different way. After our visit which lasted about 25 minutes or so, we left her home to head back across the river at a time when schools all over the community were letting out for the day. Young African American students (the community is over 97% African American) were laughing, and joking with each other, bouncing balls and carrying book bags as they walked home from school. It was a sunny day but as we drove along my fears subsided and I began to see the community bathed in a bright, brilliant light.

Goosebumps crawled down the back of my neck and continued down the backside of both my arms as this run down community seemed transformed into complete beautiful. For a moment, to me, East St. Louis looked to me like a paradise.

In our story today, nearly as soon as we begin reading we run into problems. First the disciples think Jesus is a ghost, we wonder if they recognize him? Then he offers to show them his wounds. He continues doing things a human body does like eating. Yet the confused and frightened disciples seem speechless before him. Jesus reveals why he has come back, “the messiah is to suffer and die and to rise from the dead on the third day,” then he tells them to “go and be witnesses of these things.” We still get the sense they are frozen in place.

Colleague Kathryn Huey writes, “The resurrection causes the disciples to embark on a steep spiritual learning curve.”

In a way I think the emphasis Luke’s story places on Jesus’s body is important for our world today. Stephen Cooper says, “the resurrection of Jesus’ body affirms the goodness of the

human body.” He continues, “For many reasons in the early years of the church, and just as much today, people of faith tend to separate the body and the spirit, with the spirit being celebrated and the body often being denigrated.”

I think this approach has contributed to the discomfort we feel with the topic of human sexuality. Much of our lives we are inundated with negative messages about the human body. TV commercials which define beauty by nearly impossible standards. Fashion, music videos, TV programs and movies are all guilty as well. Society defines beauty so strictly even models end up having their photographs airbrushed and movie crews have to consider camera angles and lighting to make people fit the popular image of beauty. Then we turn to the bible and we hear messages like, the flesh is weak but the spirit is strong. What resources are we left with to help us engage in discussions about the human body; often we end up embarrassed or ashamed when the topic comes up.

Cynthia Lano Lindner describes the resurrection as “God’s affirmation that creation matters, that love and justice matter, that humanity in all its ambiguity and complexity, is still fearfully and wonderfully God-made.” Let’s take that message in deeply... You are God-made. You don’t have to lose weight, or workout more, or get plastic surgery, or buy certain clothes or buy certain personal products to be beautiful. At times we may need to do somethings for our own health or well-being, but they don’t make us beautiful... we are all God-made, and you know the ole saying, “God don’t make junk.”

Considering this topic always brings me back to the Creation story where theologians have often understood human beings through the story of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit. The conclusion is that we are all born in sin because our bodies overpower our sense of right and wrong. If we take another look at that creation story we see the author’s description of human beings does not begin with the temptation story. The discussion of humankind actually begins in Genesis 1:26-27,

At the end of each day of creation we we hear, “And God saw that it was good.” Then when it’s time to make humans God says, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon earth.’ So God created humankind; in the image of God human beings were created; male and female God created them.”

What if, instead of humanity being born in original sin, this closer look at scripture suggests we understand ourselves as being born in Original goodness, or we born in original blessing.

A few questions for each of us to reflect upon as we consider the idea that we are born in original goodness... how might this change our view of ourself? What discussions might this open up in our relationships and families? And finally, How might this transform the embarrassment some of us may feel when people broach the topic of the human sexuality?

Luke's story today presents just this kind of Body-Spirit dilemma. On the one hand Jesus is presented with no doubt in this story as being a body, a human body that eats and talks and walks. Even though it is after the resurrection the author wants us to take seriously that this isn't ghost. But on the other hand, story after story and his disciples and closest friends don't recognize him. Mary at the tomb thinks he is the Gardner. The disciples in the locked room think he is a ghost. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus don't recognize him until he sits at the table with them at the end of the day and breaks bread. Why don't the disciples and Mary recognize Jesus if he is a body? What prevented them from seeing Jesus? The question takes me back to that day in East St. Louis.

Driving by those students that day and suddenly seeing potential, and hope and beauty it wasn't the community that changed. No one turned on a bright light. Those youth were not magically transported to Nirvana. The frail dancer whose strength shined through in her commitment to Refugees was still frail and hungry. I was changed. God can momentarily and miraculously transformed our eyesight and opened our heart to see with Resurrection Eyes. And when God does this, we may hardly recognize the most familiar person or place. Through Resurrection eyes we see everything new.

I can't explain it, but sometimes God allows us to see through divine retinas. Sometimes God temporarily replaces a person's lenses and transforms the neurons in the brain. The bright light, the beauty, the hope, the grace and energy all united to create a temporary glance into how God sees all the time. In all those stories where the Disciples meet the risen savior and don't recognize him, but later come to see exactly who he is, I think something like this is going on. The categories and prejudgments the disciples had, the expectations that he was dead, all become overwhelmed by the vision God grants them.

There is certainly parts of this story we will never be able to explain and I think the sense of mystery is intentional. Without fully being able to understand how, the resurrection sends those goosebumps of hope crawling down our necks, and tingles of beauty sliding down the back of our arms, and we see how God sees. We see how God is transforming our hearts and minds. For just a moment the whole world and all its people shine with the fullness of this truth; that we are all fearfully and wonderfully, God-made.

Amen