

The Anatomy of Christ: Mind, Heart, Body - Part 3

Easter Sunday

March 31, 2013

Caldwell Presbyterian Church

Rev. John Cleghorn

Texts: Luke 24:1-12

1 Corinthians 12:27-31

All they wanted was the body.

Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Mary, the mother of James, had their reasons.

At the very least, they had strict religious customs in mind. Proper burial stood as a high priority in first century Judaism. So the women brought spices and other means of treating Jesus' body with respect and dignity.

But there were other reasons. The end had been so awful. All Jesus' followers could do watch as the Roman soldiers tortured and hung him on the cross. The stinging words of the crowd and the chief priests as they mocked Jesus still hung in the air.

In addition to observing the old burial laws, surely what the women also wanted that morning was closure, some kind of solace. Luke tells us that the body was laid in a tomb just as the Sabbath arrived, when no work could be done. So the body had already been there for a day without any treatment.

So, on the first day of the week, they came early, before anyone else was stirring, hoping to anoint Christ's body, one last expression of their love and loyalty to the one who had given them all new sight.

God must have known that Jesus' followers would have a hard time believing. Yes, they found the tomb empty. The angels were there to explain that Jesus had risen. But even that would not be enough. So Jesus would have to appear in bodily form, if only for a time, to help them understand how things were going to work from that point on.

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Now here we are.

We have, in our own ways, tried to be "with" Jesus in the last three days since our Maundy Thursday service. Dozens of you came at all hours to take part in the prayer vigil so thoughtfully prepared by Caldwell's own cadre of loyal and dedicated women.

We all have tried to prepare for this day by considering what it means to have the mind of Christ, a self-emptying orientation to life that makes room only for God's purposes for our lives. We've also probed more deeply into the heart of Christ, those parts we can understand as mortals and those parts that were kept separate and divine for such a time as this.

Now it is Easter. Not even bad weather can dampen our spirits. As with the two Marys, Joanna, Peter and the other apostles, we have found the tomb empty. We have heard the angels' explanation of events. But, as with those first followers of Christ, we are left wondering: How is it that we can understand and respond to this unexpected turn in the story of God with us?

Two decades later, the Apostle Paul faced the same question. The Jesus movement had taken root in the region, inspired by those Easter events and led by Jesus' loyal apostles. Paul wrote a letter to one such gathering in the city of Corinth. In that letter, he turned to a metaphor that was common in the Greco-Roman culture of the time. But he did so in a way that spoke a needed word to those early persecuted Christians. And the metaphor stuck.

“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it ....”

This is no accidental metaphor. It is no accident and it isn't just a metaphor. So, listen deeply. Paul explains the parts of the body are varied. They are diverse and they are interdependent. The parts of the body are to be unified, pursuing the common good and ordered by God to have concern for one another. One part is no greater than the next. All are needed and none is to claim superiority or special status.

O, how the modern church, with its penchant for schism and division and homogeneity, needs to hear and heed those words again. As Paul also wrote in Corinthians:

For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves of free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

Today we had the privilege of enacting Paul's words as we baptized Margaret Mae Kiviranna. She now takes her place in the body alongside the rest of us, bonded to Christ and set apart to serve God in ways that will be revealed to her and her family. We, the body, rejoice.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. 12:13

But the image doesn't end there. The authors of Ephesians and Colossians added to our understanding that Christ now serves as the head of the body. We Presbyterians affirm this in our own constitution, whose opening paragraphs claim these truths:

“God has put all things under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and has made Christ the head of the church, which is his body.” Christ calls the church into being, gives the church its faith and life and is the church's authority.<sup>2</sup>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer understood how to think of this body. Even as he fought to save the church, the body of Christ, from the Nazis, he never gave in to thinking of the church as anything but the real embodiment of Christ's will and spirit. As he wrote in his classic The Cost of Discipleship:

“We should think of the Church not as an institution but as a person, though of course a person in a unique sense.”<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps that is the most important Easter message we can hear today. Yes, there is great theology and doctrine that comes to mind and, no doubt, is filling church sanctuaries around the world.

But here at Caldwell, as we give thanks again for our own resurrection, as we think about what God would have us do in the next three to five years, let us recommit to doing all we can to keep this a church that works and cares on the human level.

As we go to the tomb one more time to find that Christ's human body is indeed gone, that Christ is risen, let us recommit to keeping the humanity in the church, this church. We are blessed with growth. We can feel the Spirit at work. We sense that we have been given a special calling, a rare opportunity to exhibit God's love. As Christ's body, we are bound to his authority and thus free to live in the lively, joyous reality of the grace of God.

“The lively, joyous reality of the grace of God.” Those words are from our very own denominational constitution. Who knew?

The Apostle Paul wanted the same “lively, joyous reality” for his friends and believers in Corinth. He gave them the image of the body to help them understand it. But he didn't leave them with just the image of the church as the body of Christ. And, in his letter, he didn't then launch into another metaphor or explanation of systematic theology.

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<sup>2</sup> Book of Order G1.0100

<sup>3</sup> P. 241

No, he reached for what he thought could complete their understanding – and ours – of what it means to be Christ's body. He called it "a still more excellent way." That "still more excellent way" was summed up in one word: love.

No exhaustive doctrine. No organizational charts showing proper church polity and governance. No theses on what should differentiate a Presbyterian from a Methodist from a Baptist from a Pentecostal from a Roman Catholic.

Only love. That is what should activate us. At the end of the day, when things came to a climax in Holy Week, that is what defined the Mind of Christ. It is what shaped the heart of Christ, and it is what should connect and mobilize us as the body of Christ here at the corner of Park and Fifth.

Yes, we stay busy with our best efforts. We feel compelled to speak for justice and equality for all of God's children on a whole range of issues, more than enough to keep us busy. We are good at committee work. We love to start new ministries, almost faster than we can keep up with them. We are eager to discern and discuss and dream about what comes next in this amazing thing we have all found.

But today, Easter Sunday, the message could hardly be more simple. It is love. That God loved the world so much that God's only son came to live and to die that we might have life abundant.

Love and life abundant through the grace of our Creator, a still more excellent way. That is what we find in the empty tomb today. It is what joins us to Christ and to one another. It was the earthly Jesus' parting gift to us, the chance to be his body in all we say and all we do.

That beats a chocolate bunny any day.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

