

Praying the Body Electric

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 11 April, 2021

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkin

Easter 2B

Acts 4: 32-35; John 20: 19-31

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts give us strength and peace, O God our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

The word emerging has come to the fore recently. It expresses, I think, where many people of spirit are in our lives and faith journeys. And it's also a central aspect of our world as a whole, isn't it, as we engage with the uncertainties and opportunities of possible futures with and beyond Covid 19. More broadly, the theme emergence is a powerful theme in much contemporary thinking, philosophy, science and society.

Lively questions therefore surround and stir in us. What kind of world is it in which we live and might like to live? What is coming into being, not least in spirituality? And what difference might these things mean to us - our lives and faith journeys. In other words, to connect with the Christian story again, what does resurrection and being a resurrection people mean for us? Because as our gospel today once again reminds us, resurrection is an invitation into a mysterious future in the power of love.

Consequently in these next few weeks of the Easter season we're trying to enter into deeper reflection on what is emerging in us, and in our journeys with others. And it's an invitation to all of us to share in different ways. You might like to talk with one another and share with one another as we go through this period.

Today's gospel speaks of Thomas, particularly, trying to make sense of Christ's risen body. What difference did it make to them? And what might the resurrection of the body mean to us? I start with the body.

I want to start by offering a contemporary image of the body which is currently in the National Gallery in Canberra. In the first part of *Know My Name*, an exhibition of Australian female artists from 1900 to today (and you can see, those of you got the service sheet), you can see a photo, one photo, one glimpse from one side of this sculpture by the artist Nell.

It's a striking black figure seated in a lotus pose created by full body cast, and it's covered in all kinds of symbols, signs, words and patterns of various kinds. Now it's partly a self-portrait and the inscriptions denote ways in which Nell herself has been described or explored, or explored herself. And if you think about it yourself, we carry those things don't we? The things that have been said to us, the things we believed about ourselves, the opportunities we've had, the way we've been placed, sometimes, into situations. In a sense, she's projecting what there is in us. What is it that we are as a body?

For this is not just a picture of herself, but also applicable to other bodies. And she herself says of this work: *male and female, apples and oranges, fullness and emptiness, day and night, black and white, come together in a non-binary way. They occupy the same space. This figure is all encompassing, a world without hierarchies, and a garden sprouting.*

It's a very striking, but I think a beautiful and open image of what the potential depth and diversity of the human body is. A representation of flexible adaptations and the variety of values we can ascribe to our own bodies or other bodies along the way. It doesn't determine what any one body is to be - as often our religious traditions have done, as well as other things, but rather it invites us into new life and possibilities. And what I would suggest to you is that that is what the resurrection body is about. About potentiality and new life whatever our bodies have been.

No wonder it has as its sub-title *self-nature is subtle and mysterious*. She says: *it could be any of these things and many more. Non-sex monk rock*. What is the body, because it breaks open this new deeper way of seeing and being bodied.

Now this sculpture resonates for me of the resurrected body of Christ, as I say. Because as our biblical texts vividly highlight, Christ's body is subtle and mysterious. And more than that, it's an invitation to share in greater subtlety and mystery in our own bodies. To open ourselves to fresh possibilities and in the lives and bodies of others.

Nell says it's a world without hierarchies. We're invited in to be part of a garden sprouting. It's what it is to be the body of Christ. This, it seems to me, goes to the heart of today's gospel. Because traditionally (and especially in recent times in the western world), in John chapter 20 we've had a narrative that's often been interpreted as about doubt, haven't we.

But I think it's much more about the nature of divine transformed bodies and what (to adapt a phrase from Walt Whitman's great poem) I would call an invitation to pray the body electric! Praying the body electric. How do we do that? That is part of what I think emerging spirituality is about.

Does the resurrection body electrify you? The gospel stories often remind me of the first time that I encountered, in a sense, the resurrection happening to me, in my body. It was when I heard of the first transgender priest. And I can recall the exact moment and the exact spot where I was! I can see in front of me, right now and always, the church paper I'd picked up and Carol Stone's picture and I was truly electrified.

It was like the heavens had been opened, a light had shone down, death dealing powers had been cast away, and a pathway had been opened into new life and freedom. I was possible! My mystery was real! My body was possible and had been revealed. It took me many more years for me fully to embody that resurrection. But like the first disciples the way to transformation had been opened.

That's my experience. What is your experience of the resurrection happening in your own body, or the call of resurrection to you now? For the resurrection of the body is about transformation. How we see them how. Do we know them? How do we live in them and relate to the bodies of others? It's not about the details of this or that body. It's about this subtle and mysterious potential we have in them all; and in us all as bodies together. And in the body of the planet, the body of God as a whole.

And that is the heart of the gospel, I believe. And what Thomas, in our story, was missing. It wasn't so much he had doubts, as he was obsessed with little details and not appreciating and inviting and entering into the mystery.

For Thomas had a problem didn't he? He'd heard the news about Jesus' resurrection, but he couldn't accept it. And I think that shows him to be more like a fundamentalist than a woolly liberal. The mystery of faith wasn't really his strong point. He didn't want the mystery, he didn't want to be transformed. He wanted to sort things out. The mystery of faith. Literally speaking for Thomas, things had to be nailed down and precise. And so we have this encounter with Jesus.

Now, speaking personally, this conversation has a very familiar ring to it as a transgender person. And some others, who have *othered* bodies, as it were, have had this experience. The trans man, Father Shannon Kearns, puts it very well. He says he's lost track of the number of conversations he's had with nice enough people who somehow have to have more details about his body. *Yes, they say, I hear you're transgender. You have risen from your tomb, as it were, but can I have a few more details to satisfy my curiosity? I know it's intrusive, but you don't expect me to receive you just like that do you? How about you tell me about all the wounds you've had to your body? And better still, could you open them up a bit and show me the scars? Maybe I can have a sneak peek or a little investigation? I'm like Thomas, don't you know, and I need to check these things out.*

Now that sort of encounter is quite exasperating (that's a polite way of putting it)! It happens quite a bit. Officialdom is full of it! And, as I say, others with othered bodies also experience that, don't they? Particularly people with disabilities. You're transgender? Prove it! You want to change your birth name and your assigned gender? Prove it! Prove it to us that you're not a lie. Prove it with your body. Prove that you've been through all we expect or insist you've been through! Prove to us that a doctor has checked you! And a psychologist! And psychiatrist! And Uncle Tom Cobley and all! Prove it! Show us your scars! Let us touch your wounds. Prove to us what you say you are! Many of my good friends (and I'm sure you've had this experience too) who've had dealings with the National Disability Scheme bureaucracy will echo these things.

In contrast, the details of the resurrection body are not about proof and argument. For what we see in Jesus' resurrection is a transfigured body. It's got continuities with the body Jesus had, but significantly different. It has marks of the past and, indeed, vitality of its own transition, but the resurrection body is a new creation. And so it challenges, I think, our preconceptions about the body on many levels.

Like Nell's sculpture, it asks us to reconsider how we look at our bodies in life and in death. It invites us into experiencing our own bodies and the bodies of Christ as mysteries. As pathways to ever evolving, emerging life and transformation. As Christians do, we think about the difference the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body, in this sense, might make to how we view our bodies - not in an afterlife, but here and now. And those around us.

The body, for all of us, is a real and potential site, isn't it, of pain and shame. But also of liberation and joy. In wrestling with this, God is found in our bodies, not apart from them.

So, my question for us to take away and reflect upon today, is: what are our emerging ideas of the body; and how are we to enable what I think is God's body positivity. His positive attitude towards the body, which often our tradition hasn't shared with us. How do we help that emerge?

Let me, in closing, briefly open one further stream of emerging body spirituality. And I'm not qualified to speak about this, but I do so to invite others who have some experience and for us to read and reflect from others.

This area of emerging Christian body positivity comes from theologians of disability, including the great pioneer Nancy Iceland. She died at 44 years in 2009 having lived with pain throughout her life due to a congenital bone defect in her hips, for which she had 11 operations before she was 13. Awful! So, why then, do you think she said: *that when she went to heaven, she hoped she would still be disabled.*

I don't think it was because of the pain, do you? Her reason was that her identity had been formed with her disability, so that without it, as she put it, she'd be absolutely unknown to myself - and perhaps to God. In that sense, I think Nancy might have agreed that Thomas did us a good turn in confirming that Jesus still had the wounds and the scars and the brokenness of his body as the resurrected body.

Nancy reflected helpfully about next week's gospel reading, which is a bit of a tie with this one, where Jesus invites the disciples as a whole to touch him - as if they look upon him as if they thought they saw a ghost. And he was saying: no it's much more real than that!

Nancy strikingly comments: *in presenting his impaired body to his startled friends the resurrected Jesus is revealed as the disabled God.* The disabled God! God thus remains a God whom the disabled, and all the othered bodies and battered bodies of our world, can identify with, Nancy argued.

He's not, in that sense, cured and made whole, but his injuries are part of him. Not a divine punishment or an opportunity for healing, but an invitation to go deeper into the mystery of love.

With our variety of bodies does that make sense to you or to someone you love? It does to me. It affirms that God is the God of all of us, whatever our bodies are like, positive or negative, in certain aspects. For even the negative aspects of the body of Jesus are taken into the fullness of God in the resurrection

For it is, as it were, the differently abled God, Jesus, who is raised for us. So through Christ's life death and resurrection, all that is valuable about ourselves is raised and invited into greater transformation.

So many of us bear bodies in which pain and the forces of death bind us, but we are called into this subtle and mysterious power of love which can not only hold us but transfigure us.

In a world in which bodies are so contested, and in which we may struggle ourselves with our own, may we know that transformative power and share the joy of the resurrection of the body with others.

In the name and through the grace, in the wounds of Jesus. Amen.