

I came across a story that I thought was going to be an uplifting example of redemption and new life, appropriate to this Easter season when we celebrate resurrection. A young woman who had been making a living in adult entertainment realized that work was not healthy or affirming, so she gave it up; she was baptized, and sometime after her career change she gave an interview about how her faith was taking her life in a new direction—which is the very definition of repentance; the word *repent* literally means to turn and go a different way. Wouldn't we hope anyone in her situation would make that kind of change? Yet it was *Christians* who rushed to condemn her—doubting the sincerity of her conversion, claiming her baptism was invalid, demanding that she become a nun and join a convent (as if that's what Christians typically do) or that she give away all her money and possessions (as if *that's* what Christians typically do), and with some claiming that even that wouldn't matter—that because of her past, her prayers didn't count, that she is beyond redemption. Where I came across this story was the backlash against that backlash—Christians from a very different perspective saying: *Wait a minute. This isn't the Spanish Inquisition; we don't demand proof of other people's faith. What happened to being justified by grace so that none of us may boast, since all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God? Since when do we doubt God's ability to redeem—especially when someone is already living a new life?* In other words, do we believe resurrection is possible or not?

The lectionary flips between gospels during the Easter season, so to review Luke's version: two men dressed in white announce the resurrection to the women at the empty tomb; they relay this message to the disciples, who do not believe them; two disciples leave the group and end up walking with Jesus, but they don't recognize him until he breaks bread and disappears; they immediately return to Jerusalem and are still telling the others about seeing Jesus when he appears again, which is where we pick up the story today. Jesus calms the fears and doubts of the disciples and shows them that he is flesh and blood—not a ghost. This is a major concern of the gospel writers, in part because bodily resurrection wasn't a settled theological doctrine in Jesus' day: one point of contention between the Pharisees and the Sadducees was that the Pharisees believed in bodily resurrection but the Sadducees did not—presumably why they were so sad, you see, as the song goes. Then into this debate steps the resurrected Jesus, who appears to Mary in the garden and the disciples on the road to Emmaus—but with a body that no-one recognizes at first. Jesus' hands and feet still bear the marks of the crucifixion, but these wounds do not appear to hurt Jesus or impact his mobility—he's able to walk all the way to Emmaus. Jesus disappears and appears again inside locked rooms. So we can see why the disciples might think he's a ghost. Jesus instructs them to touch him and eats fish in front of them to prove he is wholly, bodily present; ghosts don't eat.

Jesus' physical resurrection would have surprised Jesus' contemporaries and the first Christian communities, but it's always been part of the story for us. We may not be able to explain or understand the resurrection of the body, and we may struggle to believe it, but the concept, which we profess each week in the creed, isn't new to us. So since the debate over bodily resurrection was settled so long ago, what are we meant to learn from Jesus sharing this meal and proving he's not a ghost? First, since Jesus' resurrection was embodied, *we* have the promise of bodily resurrection. And since Jesus still bore the wounds he suffered in this life, but in resurrection those wounds were not debilitating, *we* have the hope that even if our bodies are less than fully cooperative in this life, our resurrected bodies will not constrain us. Yet the even better news of this story is not about life after death, but about *this* life. Because if Jesus experienced a fully embodied resurrection, if even death was no match for the living Lord, then surely there are no limitations to what God can redeem and restore.

A friend of mine is always trying to get me to read and discuss with her the latest of what I'd describe as self-help books, all of which basically say the same thing: we can't control other people or much of what happens to us, but we do have some control over ourselves, how we react to others, and how we choose to view the world. That's not bad advice. However, there are some problems—personal and systemic—that just can't be solved through the power of positive thinking; sometimes only resurrection will do. If Jesus only returned as a ghost; if the disciples only saw a vision; if Jesus only lived on as a memory or a muse, then faith in Jesus could be about motivation, morality, or mindset—about how we should react and get by in this broken world; but resurrection without substance couldn't be about a God who is fully present with us, who has the power to transform us, who brings new life out of death. Jesus invited the disciples to touch him and ate in front of them as a way of saying, "It's really me—not a ghost, not a dream, not a memory. No part of me is still in the grave; I'm truly, fully, completely alive and here with you." And if Jesus, whose body was broken on the cross, can be resurrected even from death, then surely God can restore whatever has been broken in our lives. Nothing in our past, present, or future—or to take us back to the outcry over that reformed young woman, nothing in anyone *else's* past, present, or future—is beyond God's redeeming power.

Jesus ate with the disciples to assure them that he was truly present with them. When we gather at this table, in communion with all the saints, we touch and taste bread and wine, body and blood, to assure us of the presence of Jesus who restores and renews our lives. In word and sacrament, we are invited not just to believe that God raised Jesus, but to trust that God rescues us. May we live in joy as God's free people and not doubt or be surprised but boldly anticipate God's redeeming love in our lives.