

# Full Sermon – Brokenness, Resurrection, and Hope

*Luke 22:15-19; 24:1-3*

There are many parts of the 2002 Annual Conference in Louisville that I would like to forget. But there is one memory that sticks with me. Paul Grout was the moderator that year and, in addition to being a pastor, he is also an artist and woodcrafter. Some of you may remember that the sermon he preached at Annual Conference that year was the same sermon he preached wherever he traveled during his year as moderator. He designed a large, life-sized wooden Jesus that he would construct as the beginning of his sermon and then attach to a cross that he had set up beforehand on the stage. Thus, the first half of his sermon was in silence, as the gathered body would watch the art form of Jesus on the cross slowly take shape. It was a powerful image.

At Annual Conference, however, Paul couldn't get the parts to work. No matter how hard he tried, the pieces of Christ's body just didn't come together as they should. Finally, he simply turned and walked back to the lectern to speak, leaving the unfinished, incomplete wooden body of Jesus, half dangling on the cross. The strangest part for me was that he didn't even acknowledge that everything hadn't gone as it should. He just started preaching and kept preaching, as if his art work of the body of Jesus wasn't even there. And I have to confess to you that I couldn't even tell you what his sermon was about, because from the point where it was clear Paul was having difficulties with his art to the point where he finished his sermon, I kept wishing he would turn to his Jesus and say, "Friends, the body of Christ is broken."

The body of Christ is broken. It is a fitting symbol for a denomination that cannot, will not, and has even refused to admit its corporate brokenness. We are a denomination that has had numerous opportunities to publicly admit our brokenness. But we don't. Instead, we try to pretend that everything is just fine. We breathe a collective sigh of relief when an Annual Conference passes without a major incident or a District Conference passes without a potentially divisive query, or an issue of Messenger comes without a letter to the editor that makes us grit our teeth. We project an image of unity – false unity, in my mind – and fervently try to persuade us. In the meantime, the whole denomination whistles past the graveyard while women in leadership and LGBTQ Jesus followers are treated like pariahs by large swaths of our churches. Sisters and brothers, is this the church we want? No, I don't believe it is. For our own sanity and integrity, I invite you to speak these words with me aloud, as both confession and affirmation: "Friends, the body of Christ is broken."

The body of Christ is broken. The body of Christ, broken for you. These are familiar words, words that we have spoken many times. We speak these words as parts of our Love Feast, in our observances of the bread and cup of Christ. We speak these words as parts of our Holy Week remembrances, these words that remind us of the synergy that exists between Jesus,

our individual faith journeys, and the body of Christ that is the church. The body of Christ, broken for you. Jesus speaks these words to his disciples, then and now, when trying to offer a final lesson for how to be community in his name. We rightfully interpret these words as a call for unity with Jesus, often reflecting upon them during the last week of his life, in a specific context, with a specific purpose.

So, if we reflect upon the brokenness spoken by Jesus in this text at all, we connect that brokenness to Jesus' physical body, broken on the cross, a precedent to the miracle and the mystery of the resurrection. How often do we reflect upon this text in the context of the church, in the context of our own bodies? The body of Christ, broken. Our bodies, broken. The church body, broken. Not that Jesus wishes for the church to be broken, nor that our bodies, our minds, our spirits would be broken. No. Just the opposite. Jesus is suggesting that when our bodies, our minds, our spirits are broken, he not only abides with us in our brokenness, he is broken, too. Likewise, when the body of Christ that is the church is broken, whether the church universal, the Church of the Brethren, or our individual congregations, Jesus recalls and offers his brokenness in solidarity with us.

Friends, the body of Christ is broken. But instead of that being something to ignore, deny, dismiss, or find shameful, our brokenness is a place where we can find kinship, with Jesus and with one another. In Jesus, we follow One who himself experienced brokenness, One who still is broken, and thus, One who finds strength at the broken places, in his life and in ours. We join together at the sources of our brokenness, where the strength we find with Jesus is compassion, affirmation, and deep, all-encompassing love, rooted in the Divine, but most powerfully experienced in relationship with one another.

Theologian, scholar, and transgender lesbian Virginia Ramey Mollenkott writes, "To one degree or another, all of us must constantly choose between joyous connectedness and isolated, angry despair. Our purpose in life is so simple: just to be in the presence of God's loving kindness wherever we are, as Jesus was. But all of us have been damaged to one degree or another, and that damage breeds fear in us. So it is a constant challenge to grow up into the Christ-likeness, to offer to the Spirit in each moment our little willingness to see as God sees. Then and only then can we look through the terrors and pangs of embodiment and see the sacred movement of God's self through human experience...Our bodies become powerful instruments for communicating divine love only when we join affirming and compassionate thought to the passionate charge of our emotions. Instead of trusting the evidence of our senses that make us appear separate, we become powerful as we embody faith, the evidence of that undergirding unified field of energy that we cannot see but can passionately feel. Only then, can we experience the full power of resurrection."

Just like the 2002 Annual Conference, there are many parts of the 2004 film “Passion of the Christ” that I would prefer to forget. But there is one scene, the final scene, which resonates with me. It begins with a dark screen, no light whatsoever. Finally, slowly, light begins to creep in, and we can barely make out the silhouetted face of Jesus. What we see of him looks almost exactly the same as the beaten up, beaten down visage of his body that we remember at his death. It’s the same body. Only it’s not. The brokenness of his body remains. The punctures on his hands, feet, and side are still there. But his body has been transformed, resurrected. He has been transformed, resurrected. We have been transformed, resurrected. When we engage resurrection as an intellectual exercise, it often seems distant and foreign to us. When we try to offer a rational explanation for it, we falter and fail. Resurrection power cannot be measured or studied. It must be experienced, with mind, body and spirit. We all share in the resurrection story of Jesus. We all have experienced resurrection stories of our own. These are often not stories of literal resurrection, but stories of God’s resurrection power in us that are no less miraculous. We tell these stories of resurrection because they teach us more about God. They teach us more about our own brokenness. They teach us more about one another and what binds us together. And we tell these stories because they give us hope - hope in the face of brokenness.

Earlier in worship, you heard the resurrection story of the congregation of Beacon Heights. This is not a fairy tale story. There is no ‘happily ever after’ to our tale. The story of this congregation is not complete. Our scars clearly remain, as does our brokenness. But so does the resilience of our faith, the power of our convictions, and the strength of our inclusive love for our people and for all peoples. We have not experienced resurrection. We are experiencing it. Ours is a story of becoming, a sacred story filled with faithful, imperfect, beloved, children of God. Ours is a story of hope.

And while the specifics of this resurrection story belong to Beacon Heights, the greater dimensions of it belong to the whole of the body of Christ. It is a microcosm of the progressive movement in the COB and it is a microcosm of the story of Jesus. We who identify as progressives within the Christian church and the Church of the Brethren have experienced brokenness. We know that the church itself is broken. But while we are unafraid to admit our brokenness, neither do we choose to remain there. We are a broken people who are also a resurrection people, a hopeful people, a faithful people. We are a people who trust in the light, who abide in the light, who have faith in the light shining in the darkness and the darkness shall not overcome it.

The following unattributed quote captures the essence of Christ’s prophetic call for us, as progressives and as people of faith: “When you come to the edge of all the light you know and are about to step into the darkness of the unknown, faith is knowing that one of two things will happen: There will be solid ground to stand on or you will be taught to fly.” Yes, friends,

the body of Christ is broken. Yes, the body of Christ remains divided. Yes, it is unclear whether the corporate body of Christ will have the faith to step out into the unknown. But this body of Christ, our bodies, rises from the depths of our brokenness as a resurrected people, as a hopefilled people, as a faithful people, as a people blessed and beloved by God. And so we rise. And still we rise. Amen.

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