Jesus’ risen, mutilated body

In Luke’s postresurrection appearances, the disciples have to reckon with the traumatic somatic.

by Ched Myers in the September 11, 2019 issue

José Clemente Orozco, *Christ Destroys His Cross,* oil mural, 1922–24

Almost 65 years ago, Mamie Till-Mobley decided to have an open casket at the funeral of her murdered son Emmett Till. Weeks before, this young mother from the south side of Chicago had sent her 14-year-old son on a train to Money, Mississippi, to visit relatives. For allegedly whistling at a white woman, Till was abducted, beaten, shot in the head, and dumped in a river. His body was discovered three days later, and although Mississippi officials advocated for a quick burial, his mother demanded that it be sent home to Chicago, where thousands of people attended the funeral on September 3, 1955, at Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ.

By making a public display of her son's mutilated body, Mobley was insisting that America gaze on the reality of Jim Crow brutality. The body, so disfigured that Till was identifiable only by the initials on a ring on his finger, was viewed by thousands of people and photographed and published in newspapers and magazines. "She saw Emmett as being crucified on the cross of racial injustice," says Lonnie Bunch, founding director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, in a comment to *Smithsonian*. "She felt that in order for his life not to be in vain, she needed to use that moment to illuminate all of the dark corners of America and help push America toward what we now call the Civil Rights Movement." Indeed, this moment sparked that movement to life months before the Montgomery bus boycott—though historian Elliott Gorn points out that this awakening was only among black folk; most white people didn't see pictures of Till until decades later.

In Luke's Gospel, the risen Christ offers a similar challenge to the disciples: they have to reckon with his mutilated body, with the traumatic somatic. Yet First World artistic depictions of the risen Christ—both classical and contemporary—are typically glorified, sanitized, and bleached white. These sentimentalized reproductions function to stunt our political imaginations, and they do little to help us face realities such as social and climate crisis. They reflect docetic theologies that reduce resurrection to a triumphant Hollywood happy ending; amid the carbon and capitalist status quo, they animate only otherworldly distraction.

Fortunately, such images do not actually reflect our scriptural tradition. It is much grittier and more engaged—concerning not only the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth, but his resurrection as well.

For Luke, the encounter with the Risen One also animates a movement that fiercely advocates for life. Luke's version of John's more famous "Doubting Thomas" story occurs at the culmination of the venerable Emmaus Road (Luke 24:13–49). In the second half of this narrative, the action dramatically reverses direction: two fugitive disciples, who were introduced in the story fleeing Jerusalem after the execution of their leader, now return to the capital city to face its dangers (24:33). The fractured community regathers, and the pair relate their experience to other fugitive members of the movement. First they describe the extraordinary catechism in prophetic literacy they received on the Emmaus Road, and then how the stranger who expounded scripture was revealed to them in the breaking of the bread as none other than their leader redevivus—at which point Jesus appears again, now to the whole group (24:34–36). (For more on the Emmaus story, see my chapter in *Getting*

on Message: Challenging the Christian Right from the Heart of the Gospel, edited by Peter Laarman.)

The disciples' reaction to this epiphany—surprised now for the second time in the story—is instructive. Luke reports that they are "terrified and awestruck" (24:37)—a double iteration of fear. The Greek verb *ptoeō*, in the active mood, means "to terrify" and here, as a passive participle, to "be terrified." It is entirely understandable that these disciples would be petrified: after all, their leader has just been crucified. This gruesome form of public execution—reserved for political dissidents—had only one function in Rome's occupied territories: to intimidate subjects. It was a very effective way of broadcasting the message: *Look what happens to those who challenge the sovereignty of Caesar.*

Notably, the only other time the verb *ptoeō* appears in the New Testament is in Luke 21:9: "When you hear of wars and upheavals, do not be terrified; these things are inevitable." Luke wants us to understand that violence is inevitable under empire—not least as the political consequence of any prophetic speaking of truth to power, as the stranger explained earlier on the Emmaus Road (24:26).

The other adjective used in 24:37, however, has a different focus. It is *emphobos*, which in the New Testament usually connotes awe in the presence of divine power. This vocabulary suggests that the disciples are caught between two types of fear. On the one hand, they cower before the handiwork of imperial terrorism, imprinted on the body of Jesus. On the other hand, they reel before the prospect that somehow Rome has not had the last word, that the divine conspiracy for life has burst the straightjacket of imperial death-dealing. Jesus, the executed rebel, is back and ready to continue organizing the movement.

Here's where this encounter gets really interesting. The disciples fear they are only seeing a "spirit" (24:37). While *pneuma* is an important theological term throughout the New Testament, it is not nearly sufficient for this appearance. The Risen One may be *elusive*, but he does not want to be mistaken as *illusive*. Having gone unrecognized once, back on the road, Jesus now offers his truest credentials: he invites their investigation of his violated body.

Two things about Jesus' rationale for putting his body on display are crucial for any theology that understands resurrection as an expression of incarnation. First, he uses the phrase "It is I, or I am" (*ego eimi*), the Greek equivalent of the

Tetragrammaton, the Hebrew name of God best rendered as “I will be who I will be.” But here the divine name is linked to flesh and bones. The notion of God-in-the-sarx was as scandalous in antiquity as it is in modernity; intensifying the scandal, this is torn-up flesh in particular.

In the Western tradition of art glorifying the resurrection, Jesus’ wounds typically appear antiseptic, as if the result of laparoscopic surgery. In fact, his flesh would have born all the marks of the hell he’d been through. Specifically, Jesus invites his disciples to examine his hands and feet—not because they would have been the most easily accessed parts of his body from under his tunic, but because they would have been the parts most mutilated from being nailed to a tree.

These mangled extremities verify that the Risen One is the Crucified One. The one neither negates nor replaces the other. The theological point is that the resurrected Christ is not unscathed by the violence of empire. He is still numbered among those who have been brutalized and left for dead. Except that he didn’t stay dead. His risen body thus now becomes the central object lesson of both lynching and liberation.

The disciples, who are really riding a roller coaster here, refuse to believe a prospect so joyful and astonishing as Jesus 2.0. While they try to sort out their confusion, almost whimsically an exhausted Jesus asks, in effect, *Dudes! It's been a long couple of days since I declared a fast at our last meal together, and I've been through, you know, a lot; anybody got a sandwich for a brother?* (24:41) Just as he still bears the wounds of his showdown with empire, Jesus still hungers. Luke radically centers the somatic. Disciples are invited both to touch flesh that has experienced violation and deprivation and to attend to its corporeal needs.

This, I would argue, is the central invitation of resurrection faith: to embrace the traumatic somatic. Our world is still riddled with terrorism both official and ad hoc. The hatred that killed Emmett Till was again on display this April in rural Louisiana, where the 21-year-old son of a local sheriff torched three black churches. Empire continues to wage war abroad, unbroken since the 2003 "shock and awe" campaign in Iraq. In northern Canada, tar sands extraction has turned vast boreal forests into an industrial sacrifice zone. Looking at our ecological devastation of the earth is like gazing at Till's mutilated body.

Luke's scene presses a disturbing question on such a world: Who generates shock and awe in our lives? Is it the power of death over life, exhibited by what Martin Luther King Jr. diagnosed as the giant triplets of pathology (to paraphrase: militarism, white supremacy, and materialist carbon addiction)? Or is it the biblical God's power of irrepressible life over death? This is the preeminent theological question of our time.

Luke's account of the Risen One—like the excruciating lesson of Emmett Till's funeral, which launched the most significant social movement in US history—challenges us to embrace the beat-up bodies of both marginalized people and degraded places around our earth. As we do, we will be more profoundly motivated also to embrace the militant evangelistic vocation to which Jesus commissions his companions at the end of Luke's Emmaus narrative: to "proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in my name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (24:47). It is we who must continue the prophetic struggle to turn history around from its captivity to our terminal addictions and compulsions (the meaning, after all, of "repentance"). It's resurrection as insurrection. And as Jesus emphasizes, this good news is not just for individuals but for nations and systems, starting at the centers of power.

Luke’s story concludes with the statement that “we are witnesses to these things” (24:48). This implicates us as hearers and readers. The noun is the word from which we derive the word *martyr*—an ever-necessary reminder of the cost of discipleship. The only way we can truly be witnesses to the resurrection, then, is to embrace the traumatic somatic—and then, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to join the resistance to all that violates people and planet and to work for healing and restorative justice.

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