

Practicing incarnation

While Christians confess the resurrection of the body, most have a spiritual body in mind.

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [April 5, 2005](#) issue

Whoever tied Easter to the spring equinox made a very good decision. For those who are so inclined, there is no better time for feeling alive, as the whole world wakes from winter and makes new birth look easy. Clumps of green grass erupt from the flat tan lawn. Bluebirds appear on the clothesline. There are so many redbuds in the woods that a pink haze seems to waft through the trees. I may have blood instead of sap, but *something* inside me rises once the earth rounds the winter bend and heads back in the sun's direction.

This time of year, my body knows things that my mind has not yet grasped, so that planting potatoes or putting fresh hay in the hens' nests becomes a kind of prayer. I bury lily bulbs in the same earth that I buried my old golden retriever in just weeks ago. I prune the crepe myrtles that my father never got around to before he became too weak to hold the shears. Whatever resurrection is all about, it has a physical dimension to it that 21st-century believers are often too ready to ignore.

From their first articulations of the faith, early Christians spoke of the resurrection of the *body*—not only because some believed they had seen the risen Christ in the flesh but also because they believed God meant to raise their own flesh too. The God who had made their bodies and declared them good would not have a change of heart on the last day. Wherever they were going with God, their bodies were going too.

For any number of reasons, this bold hope has become too difficult for many to sustain. While Christians continue to confess the resurrection of the body in their historical creeds, most have a spiritual body in mind, which is superior to the earthly model in every way. This side of the grave, flesh is needy, prone to injury, sluggish and overweight. In Paul's language, it is sinful, the weak impediment to what the spirit wills to do. Without tackling the metaphysics of resurrection or early Christian

anthropology, I wonder what such flesh-aversion says about our sense of incarnation.

When I was first taught the concept, I was taught to capitalize it. The Incarnation happened just once, in one person, a very long time ago. In Jesus alone was God's Word Made Flesh. As his follower, my job was to trust that was true, and to persuade others that it was true as well. The Incarnation was presented to me as an article of faith. It was a unique event that involved Jesus and no one else, and the fate of my own flesh depended on my acceptance of that fact.

Relatively late in life, I have decided that incarnation is less a doctrine than a practice, which Jesus did not come to do once and for all but to show any who were willing how God's word might become flesh in their own lives too.

"Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

"Give to everyone who begs from you."

"Consider the lilies, how they grow."

"In everything do to others as you would have them do to you."

In sayings like these, Jesus gave his followers teachings they could embody. He taught them to take other people's bodies as seriously as they took their own. He taught them to trust the revelatory power of lilies, vines, branches, sheep, falling stars and birds of the air, among many other things. He taught them to see God in the world the same way he did—in the way creation worked, in the way people acted—and while some of his examples were negative ones ("You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?"), he still spoke with full conviction that they could learn about God's realm by attending to their own physical lives on earth.

To practice incarnation is to discover a pedagogy that is as old as the Gospels. Why else did Jesus spend his last night on earth teaching his disciples to wash feet and share supper? With all the conceptual truths in the universe at his disposal, he did not give them things to think about when he was gone. Instead, he gave them concrete things to do, specific ways of being in their bodies together, that would go on teaching them what they needed to know when he was no longer around to teach them.

After he was gone, they would still have God's word, but that word was going to need some new flesh. The disciples were going to need something warm and near that they could bump into on a regular basis, something so real that they would not be able to intellectualize it and so essentially untidy that there was no way they would ever gain control over it. So Jesus gave them things they could get their hands on, that would require them to get close enough to touch one another. In the case of the meal, he gave them fragrant things to sip and chew that they could pass to each other around the table. In the case of the feet, he gave them real dirt and calluses that they could use to enter one another's lives.

For all our failure to honor them, our bodies remain God's best way of getting to us. To embrace the daily practice of incarnation is to walk the way of life that God opened up to us in Jesus Christ, by showing us how to inhabit our own flesh as fully and faithfully as he did his. When we are by God's grace able to follow the leader—even for an hour—then we too become God's Easter people, the latest bodily resurrections of God's word made flesh.