

## “MATTER OVER MIND”

PSALM 112, 1 JOHN 1:1-2:2

JOHN 20:19-31

MARKET SQUARE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN  
HARRISBURG, PENNSYLVANIA

THE REVEREND KELLY WIANT

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Occasionally Tom and I think we are quite clever. He with his “Tomb to Womb” sermon title. Me with my “Matter over Mind.” I wrote Tom an email after dreaming up this brilliant title saying, “See what I did there? I played off your Tomb to Womb title. Pretty clever, huh?!” He wrote back appropriately appreciative of my wit and offered, “If you want me to set you up with a stranger at the signboard out front asking you if you know that Wiant broad because you got the title wrong...let me know.” Oh if only such hilarious and perfect sermon introductions happened naturally each week. Instead, I will need to settle with pointing out our shared wit and brilliance in sermon titles.

Poor Thomas (not Tom, but the Thomas in our gospel lesson), dubbed doubting Thomas for wanting nothing more than the disciples had already received. The week before, Jesus had appeared to the disciples who were huddled in fear behind a locked door. He stood among them, said, “Peace be with you,” and then showed them his hands and his side. Thomas had not been present, so the disciples eagerly told him all about their encounter upon he returned. Thomas listened but having not been there, he wanted the same proof they received. He too wanted to see and to hear Jesus. He also wanted to touch him. Thomas wanted proof that this risen Jesus was real and was not some ghost or figment of their imagination.

The story of Thomas (we are not going to call him doubting Thomas) addresses two important truths about Jesus. First, he was human. Second, he cared deeply for his disciples.

Our gospel and our epistle lessons take great pains to point out that Jesus was seen, heard, and touched. As the author of 1 John writes, “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have **heard**, what we have **seen with our eyes**, what we have **looked at** and **touch with our hands**, concerning the word of life - this life was revealed, and we have **seen** it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and as revealed to us - we declare to you what we have **seen** and **heard** so that you may

also have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.” Notice how many times the author stresses that what is shared in his letter is that which was seen and heard. He wants the readers to understand that Jesus was seen and heard and touched and known as human.

The Gospel of John and the epistles labeled as 1, 2, and 3 John were likely composed by different authors, but most scholars agree that the authors were from within a circle of communities that shared the Johannine tradition. In other words, they were from communities of faith that were shaped by the thoughts and beliefs that are best expressed by the Gospel of John.

One of the heresies that the epistles addressed was that of Docetism, or the belief that Christ did not have a real or material body but was simply apparent or phantom. Docetism was a part of Gnosticism, a dualistic belief system that developed in 2nd Century AD. Gnosticism held that matter was evil while the spirit was good. Matter was impure and imperfect. Salvation came only through proper knowledge (the mind) and an elevation out of the material world. From this flowed the belief that Jesus could not have been human as he would not have participated in this material, bodily world. Matter was evil, after all. Jesus was good and therefore, a spirit or a phantom. All his acts and suffering, including the crucifixion, were mere appearances.

The writer of the Gospel of John uses the story of Thomas to address this heresy. Thomas puts his hands on the wounds caused by the nails of crucifixion and the sword that pierced Jesus’ side causing additional suffering. Jesus appeared to the disciples in human form, showing them his body and his wounds. Thomas took this a step further in that he touched the wounds and touched the body of Jesus proving that he was not a ghost or a phantom but made of flesh and blood. He was made matter, not a figment of their minds.

The truth of the incarnation rests in the fact that Jesus was flesh, was material, was made of matter. “And the Word became flesh and lived among us.” The incarnation and Jesus’ bodily resurrection not only testify to the reality that Jesus was human and created of flesh, blood, muscle, and bone but affirms our bodily material existence. The Word becoming flesh affirms our flesh. We are embodied people. We are more than spirits held down by material bodies, as the Gnostics believed. We are created in mind, body, and spirit to be in the image of God.

Gnosticism’s dualistic view of the world has infiltrated our modern thought patterns, whether we recognize it or not. We tend to separate body and mind, or body and spirit. We value mind over matter. In general, we do a pretty poor job of caring for our bodies. We give great credit to what we think, but little to what our bodies feel and experience. We value the thoughts and contributions of others (especially those who think like us), but not necessarily what they feel or what their bodies need.

Some within the Christian tradition, have thought of death as a release from our weak sinful bodies. The problem with this is it fails to hold up and celebrate this life or the reality that God is present in and through the world. It fails to acknowledge the incarnation - God's willingness to take on matter and become human. To believe the next life is our ultimate goal, makes this time and this world merely a stopover or a brief visit on the way. It is hard to value a world or a body that is holding us back from being with God.

This is why some early missionaries cared more about saving souls than preserving culture or tending to the physical needs of the natives they encountered. If the bodies were black or brown, they had even less value. Saving their souls was a way of freeing them from their bodies that were valued even less than those of the white man. Mind valued over matter.

This is why I bristle when I hear of mission trips that promote evangelism above all else. The assumption is that the soul is more important than the person's physical experience in this world. It is more important to ensure a soul's salvation than to provide healthcare, adequate housing, or a living wage. Such notions lead to a denigration of the human body and overtime the human being itself.

This plays out on a national and international level as well. The bodies of Syrians, Palestinians, Rohingya, and black and brown bodies in the United States are afforded less value partly because we have failed to value bodies in general.

Jesus' incarnation and bodily resurrection affirms the body and this life, giving it value and meaning. Matter over mind or maybe, matter and mind. Our lives and our faith are embodied. We cannot separate the two, so caring for our body is also a way of caring for our spiritual and faith life. Paying attention to the needs of our own body also helps us notice and value the needs of other bodies. Understanding and appreciating our own strength allows us to see and celebrate strength in other. Understanding and appreciating our own vulnerability, allows us to see and tend to the vulnerability of others.

I recently read an article in which the author confessed that several mornings in a row he woke feeling uneasy. He says, "My face felt droopy. My eyes felt tired. I wasn't sure why, but I really didn't want to get out of bed or face the day. 'I must be sad,' were the words that popped into my head." This happened several days in a row until he worried he was getting depressed. He continues, "I felt the world crashing down around me from under the covers. Yes of course I was getting depressed. I had all these business setbacks, blocks around the book I'm writing, and uncertainties about my future. Woe is me! Life is over! How could I not be depressed?"

"Then I drank a glass of water. And a few minutes of metabolization later, nothing seemed that terrible. I realized there had never been a time in my life where I didn't have any business setbacks, creative challenges, or future uncertainties. In fact, the happiest periods of my life have been full of them." The author realized what many of us fail to notice, our bodies are key to our overall well-being. Our bodies are key in our mental

and spiritual health. Matter over mind. It is not that we need to escape these bodies, but that we need to tend to them, care for them, nourish them, and even hydrate them as the the article explained so that our physical, mental, and spiritual life can thrive.

Our gospel lesson is often read as Jesus reprimanding or shaming Thomas but in fact, Jesus offers Thomas exactly what he requests and then asks him to move from unbelief to belief. In response, Thomas declares “My Lord and my God!” which is the most complete confession of faith in John’s gospel.

Jesus moves toward Thomas as he did with the disciples, giving him exactly what he needed for faith. Because he loved him, Jesus offered Thomas, without shame, proof that he was indeed alive and standing before them. Thomas needed his body to touch Jesus’ body. He needed to see, hear, and touch because his faith was grounded in his body and in his lived experience, not only in his mind or spirit.

Of course, we cannot see or touch the human body that was Jesus but as the Gospel of John and John’s epistles take great pains to tell us, we have been offered the stories of faith witnessed by others. Scripture makes the presence of God in Jesus available to faith communities in each generation. As Jesus said to Thomas, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Yet, our belief is not an exercise only of the mind or spirit. Ours is a belief based in the experience of the community of faith. It is a lived experience, a bodily reality, a faith that is lived out and nurtured when the hungry are fed, the sick are nursed, the poor lifted up, and each person and each body seen and celebrated as beloved of God.

Our moments of doubt or unbelief may not be resolved simply by drinking a glass of water, but who knows, it might help. It might also help to gather in worship with other bodies, to sing, to eat at the table, to hear the word proclaimed, and finally to go into the world to work and to serve other bodies created in God’s image.

So we believe, so let us live.