



Mediated through flesh

John 20.19-31

THE DISCIPLES have locked themselves in a room because they are afraid. I wonder how long they have been there and whether or when they plan to get on with their lives. The locked room is like a tomb where Jesus' friends are huddling together, paralyzed in their inactivity and hopelessness. I always picture this room as hot and cramped, a place that is no-place, with mortal fear lurking just outside the door. My own experience of hiding is limited to the pleasurable thrills of childhood hide-and-seek; I can only imagine what it must be like to listen breathlessly for footsteps and to wonder if my fragile cover will be ripped away in the next moment.

Suddenly Jesus is there. John doesn't tell us how he entered; he is simply there. The disciples must not have recognized him, for he identifies himself by showing them his wounded hands and side. This is a common thread through the resurrection stories: Jesus appears in the midst of those closest to him, the people who know and love him, and they do not recognize him. Mary Magdalene mistakes him for the gardener until he calls her by name. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus do not recognize the risen Christ until the end of the journey, when they share a meal with him. Only belatedly do Peter and John realize that the stranger on the shore, directing them to an astonishing catch of fish, is their teacher.

Thomas was not present in that closed-up room. Later, when his friends told him, "We have seen the Lord," he refused to believe his eyes alone and demanded to touch and probe Christ's wounded body. Jesus responds by inviting him to "put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side." This is a powerful invitation to come close and to experience his physical

presence, his physical realness. He is saying, "Look closely. Be at home with me. Don't be afraid to touch me—you will neither hurt nor offend me."

The disciples, and especially Thomas, are urged to look at his wounds to make sure that they are in the presence of Christ—not some ghost or imposter, but their friend and teacher. Were the disciples brought up like most of us? Were they taught that it's not polite to stare, particularly not at the hurts, wounds and distortions that afflict others? Were they, like us, schooled to be cautious about touch? Jesus urges them to probe his wounds. This is not a tentative little poke, but the kind of rough, exploratory touching we experience from babies and small children.

Years ago I worked for a wise psychiatrist whose patients were deeply troubled children. I shall never forget what he said. "Good mothers tend to be a little bit messy. At least, their grooming isn't perfect." He knew that the touch of the small child, seeking assurance of safety and love, should not be hampered by warnings not to spoil makeup or displace carefully arranged hair. Jesus, our good Lord and our good friend, would pass my boss's test for a loving, embracing presence. He wanted the disciples to go beyond appearances and *know* him.

Most of us present carefully prepared façades. The self we offer to others is not the product of conscious deception, yet we want no one to disturb the meticulously maintained surface. The message is implicit: Don't look too closely at my wounds, please. By all means feel free to touch me, but don't do the spiritual equivalent of spoling my makeup or mussing my hair—of cracking my surface.

But Jesus is saying, "Be at home with me, and don't be afraid to touch me. You will neither hurt nor offend me." He is setting us an example, but at the same time inviting us into ever

greater intimacy with him. He greets our fear and disbelief with loving acceptance, assuring us that he doesn't mind our questions and our probing. This gospel is no ghost story, no holy twilight zone divorced from physical reality or from everydayness. It is an invitation to come close, close enough to see the wounds and feel his risen presence.

Jesus' appearance in the midst of his frightened friends is a story of incarnation, and reminds us that God came and comes among us, experiencing and loving our humanity. We are aware of this at Christmas, when we hear that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." Then the churches fill, and even nonbelievers are drawn instinctively by the powerful image of God coming among us in the perfection, loveliness and vulnerability of a baby. Yet Good Friday is about the incarnation too. Jesus on the cross is an icon of suffering, a powerful statement about the flesh and particularly about its terrible vulnerability. His Passion reminds us of our almost infinite capacity to inflict and suffer hurt. Easter comes as a real relief from the uncomfortable physicality of Good Friday. The resurrection can be a pleasant abstraction: we can ring bells and surround ourselves with lilies and joyous music as we distance ourselves from his broken body. But the risen Christ did not appear to his followers in dreams or visions: he came among them in the homeliness and everydayness of shared walks and meals.

He still comes in everydayness. He still says: see my hands and my feet. Don't avert your eyes from my wounds out of politeness or disgust. Look at them. Put your finger here. Don't be afraid. Remember the incarnation. I came among you first in human flesh—flesh that can be hungry and fed, flesh that can be hurt, even killed. Flesh that can embody God's love.

He comes among us still, mediated through human flesh. See his hands, his side. Touch him, and see.

Margaret Guenther is director of the Center for Christian Spirituality of the General Theological Seminary (Episcopal) in New York



Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.