

When you Preach Resurrection, Preach The Disabled God

John 20:1-31

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One of the most confounding, awe-inspiring phrases on Easter is the proclamation by the women or in other accounts by the angels that when they go to the tomb that morning “He [Jesus] is not here.” In the miraculous resurrection, Jesus’s wounded body seemingly disappears. The smells the women planned to confront with the spices they brought to adorn the body vanish. The gruesome marks of the torture he suffered visible on his body are nowhere to be found.

But is the disappearing body of Jesus from so many of our Easter sermons really Good News? Do we not miss something of the story when we fail to reckon with the distinct and disabled body Jesus inhabits when he intentionally reappears, resurrected yet scarred, on the road to Emmaus, in the garden to Mary, into the locked room, at the table, and then, even hungry for fish on the beach? This Easter, what could it mean for your preaching to keep reading and remembering, to tell the story of why and how and to whom Jesus’s body also shows up? There’s a way in which preaching resurrection can end up (unwittingly) denying Jesus’s humanity. But as the disabled theologian and activist Nancy L. Eiesland wrote, it’s significant that Jesus shows up with his scars, as a disabled God, in our midst.¹ It’s significant, because not only did the God we serve not shy away from bodies, but in his final acts on earth, as the risen Lord, he took on a distinctly disabled one, as a minister. Jesus, the resurrected, disabled God is not the God they were looking for, but the God who finds them and with his scars, stretches all our imaginations of what ministry looks like.

In 1994, Nancy Eiesland, with her book, *The Disabled God*, began a movement in U.S. theology. The new field would be called “Disability Theology,” and not only this image of a disabled God, but the conviction was born that disabled people could move from the periphery to the center of theology, not as imperfect beings but as dignified, incarnate ones. If you think about it, the image of a disabled God, especially for Christianity, and especially at Easter, shouldn’t be such a stretch. But with the emphasis on the unclean nature of disabled bodies in the Old Testament and Jesus’s healings of disabled people of bodily impairments and sin in the New Testament, it’s tempting for theologians to presume that certain bodies are fundamentally out of line with Jesus’s ministry.

Yet, this is why the disabled God moving off the cross, as God incarnate, in resurrection, is so noteworthy. For those who haven’t read Eiesland’s slim but profound book, I highly recommend it. You could skim it in a few hours, but if you don’t, here

are few takeaways. First, Eiesland anchors contemporary prejudice against disabled people in structural inequalities. Writing just after the establishment of *The Americans with Disabilities Act* of 1990 she was both aware that legislation would not necessarily change attitudes, but also frustrated that the church continues to view disabled people as recipients of charity rather than advocates and instruments of change. As a disabled theologian she challenged us to acknowledge that disabled people's liberation stems from human, corporate sin; as such, liberation has transformative power for all of us.

Second, Eiesland argues that symbols, especially Christian symbols, have power and that God on the cross needs to be reconceptualized from suffering savior to disabled God² in order to truly usher in our collective, new humanity.³ Hence, she argued that reconceptualizing Jesus as the disabled God both contextualizes disabled people's experiences in powerful, dignifying ways, but also invites a holding together of all of our bodies in collective resistance⁴ that has the power to create "new symbols of wholeness and embodiments of justice."⁵ More on that later . . .

Finally, she locates this new embodiments in the common Christian practice of the eucharist, in making it truly accessible, not just individually but corporately, to all. Although we don't necessarily think of it this way, it is in the eucharist that Jesus imparts not his perfected body, but his disabled body to all of us: we are restored by our consumption of the symbols of Jesus's disabled body as not just our common humanity, but a humanity redeemed and resurrected *as is*. One wonders, in fact, how our sacraments would be different, let alone possible, if Jesus's body had fully disappeared. Instead, we have a sacrament that honors and dignifies scars.

If you read past the disappearing act on Easter morning, perhaps through the end of the Gospel of Luke or John, you will be preaching not only the staggering reality of Jesus's resurrection but the important, perplexing quality of his subsequent hybrid reappearances. Here is a Jesus who is both recognizable by his disabled body and yet still hidden in his humanity. When he walks, talks, and eats typically, it's as if his humanity actually disguises him. Only when he reveals his scars do his followers know him to be the Messiah. Although the scars offer a kind of proof, they also seem to go further in expanding and even reshaping the disciples' imaginations about who God is.

In fact, with this in mind, preachers may find some empathy and even some proclamation to "doubting Thomas's" remarks. After all, the other disciples had also come to believe because they had seen this Jesus, both divine and decidedly markedly enfleshed. So in demanding to see, feel, and experience this Jesus for himself, Thomas desires to know and behold not the Jesus he thought he knew, but the Jesus who is. Maybe Thomas knows that Jesus's scars are part of his ministry now, so his remarks are not just a defiance but a conviction that the scars matter? Maybe despite what appears, this is an Invitation for preachers not just to focus on Thomas's doubt but his imagination? What was it that he now imagined about Jesus's ministry and his own ministry because the scars remained?

What I find so prescient about Eiesland's writing is that she knew it would be hard for people to behold God as disabled. She anticipated our failure of imagination as she writes:

Liberating our theology from biases against people with disabilities is a process that will require tremendous and continual commitment to identifying with the disabled God in our midst. Even in the process of developing the symbol of Jesus Christ, disabled deity, I have heard numerous objections. Individuals who are heavily invested in a belief in the transcendence of God constituted as radical otherness will undoubtedly find this representation disconcerting. The theological implications of the disabled God resist the notion of power as absolute control over human-divine affairs. For people with disabilities who have grasped divine healing as the only liberatory image the traditional church has offered, relinquishing belief in an all-powerful God who could heal, if He would, is painful. Yet who is this god whose attention we cannot get, whose inability to respond to our pain causes still more pain? This god is surely not Emmanuel—God for us. The second objection some have expressed is the articulation of a model of God that incorporates disability signals confusion for the church, and they insist that a halt shall be called on all representational language for God. With the emergence of African American, feminist, gay-lesbian, and Latin American liberation theologies in recent history, models of God have proliferated. Yet this representational proliferation does not portend chaos; rather it is the corporate enactment of the resurrection of God.⁶

What Eiesland reminds us of in some of these remarks is not just the miracle of Jesus being resurrected with his scars, but the ministry of that Jesus coming to his followers as Emmanuel, God for us. This is a God whose attention, despite his death and pain, is still very much on us in his final days, in making clear to us that we're not alone. So it's not only that we wouldn't know God as disabled had he not returned, but we would be left much as Matthew and the original Gospel of Mark leave us, in wonder, fear, and aporia, rather than in reassurance of God's attentiveness and persistence as pastor.

Writing several decades after Eiesland, my own research shows that our imaginations are often far too constrained and limited when it comes to disabled ministers and leaders. This is why I devote several chapters in my book to not only lamenting prejudice against disabled people and calling for the church to repent from ableism, but providing what I call "glimmers of the kingdom."⁷ In one of those chapters I share about my friends the Clarke family, whose Joyful Noise worship service, emerged out of a place of pain. Their son J'den, who has autism, was being scolded because he couldn't be quiet. But in Joyful Noise, a service designed for disabled children to worship and even lead, J'den could stim, move around, use his voice to cry out, or retreat to the sensory room if he needed a break. Because J'den's family couldn't drive

thirty minutes every month to the church that hosted Joyful Noise, they implored the pastor to help them host a service at their home church. And over time that service, that takes place on Sunday afternoons once a month has impacted not just disabled children and their families but the pastor and the church that hosts it. Because when children started to see that they could lead worship and serve communion in Joyful Noise, they asked why they couldn't do so in the typical service. And so, the typical service began to change, too.⁸

The ministry of disabled children in Joyful Noise started to press the boundaries about what we thought we knew about God. And sometimes the service does look a bit like chaos, but I think Eiesland is right to proclaim it more as the “corporate enactment of the resurrection of God.” If Eiesland were alive today I think she would not only recognize the risen God in worship like Joyful Noise, but she would continue to challenge our imaginations. In chapter five of her book, she writes:

I had waited for a mighty revelation of God. But my epiphany bore little resemblance to the God I was expecting or the God of my dreams. I saw God in a sip-puff wheelchair, that is the chair used mostly by quadriplegics enabling them to maneuver by blowing and sucking on strawlike device. Not an omnipotent, self-sufficient God, but neither a pitiable, suffering servant. In this moment, I beheld God as a survivor, unpitying and forthright. I recognized the incarnate Christ in the imaged of those judged ‘not feasible,’ ‘unemployable,’ and ‘questionable quality of life.’ Here was God for me.⁹

Perhaps the real Easter miracle is not that God appears as such, but that the Spirit gives us the wherewithal to even recognize him. “Blessed are those who have not seen but yet believe,” the disabled God does not so much chide but charge us, to imagine, someday, a liberation that does not discount any of our bodies.

So this Easter, let the disabled God help us to imagine and reimagine that liberation as part of the unfolding resurrection story. “He is not here” is hardly the end of the story.

Notes

1. Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1994).

2. Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 94.

3. Eiesland, 100.

4. *Ibid.*, 97.

5. *Ibid.*, 98.

6. Eiesland, 104-5.

7. Erin Raffety, *From Inclusion to Justice* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2022), 168.

8. Raffety, *From Inclusion to Justice*, 134-38.

9. Eiesland, 89.