***It’s Christmas All Over Again***

**An Easter Sermon Preached at Lawrence Park Community Church, April 1, 2018**

**Luke 24:36-43**

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 Christians have long been suspicious of physical matter, of all flesh and blood, and especially suspicious of bodies and what bodies do. This is called asceticism.

 Well, for example, Íte was an Irish abbess who lived 1500 years ago. She placed a huge stag-beetle under her robe, against her skin. The beetle chewed on her day and night. The intense pain of this insect constantly biting her was supposed to make Íte hate her body and focus her soul on God, instead.

 One day, Íte’s insect got away and her fellow nuns stomped on it, killing it. Íte became very angry. “Where has my foster child gone?” she asked. Because, she believed, unless there is physical, bodily pain, you cannot truly focus on spiritual matters.

 Or again, in the third century, some Christians decided the best way to serve God was to flee the fleshpots of Egypt and live alone in the desert, instead. The first of these so-called “desert monks” was Saint Anthony. He lived by himself in an abandoned Roman fort. He refused all bodily pleasure: no sex, no rich foods, no baths, no good night’s sleep, and no sturdy shoes. Anthony spent his days on prayer and Psalm singing instead. He lived this way in total seclusion for twenty years—all to better to focus on God. Eventually, thousands of other Christians imitated him, also renounced life in the world, and moved into the desert to join him—in silence.

 Even today, in the Roman Catholic church, priests are not allowed to marry. The idea seems to be that by denying bodily urges and physical pleasure priests can better focus their spiritual energy on God and God’s priorities. Other philosophies and religions, such as Platonism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sufi Islam have come up with the same idea.

 That idea, once again, is this. By treating their bodies as prisons for the soul, by denying their bodies pleasure, some people believe they can fly their souls closer to God—sort of how we might deny ourselves a daily latte in order to save money to visit the Holy Land.

 Our Jewish friends know better. According to Genesis, God declares that every physical thing he—or she—created, from Everest to Erie, and from parsnips to people, is good. Of Adam and Eve, we read, “they were both naked, and not ashamed.” Of the fruit of the Garden, God says, eat whatever you want—except of course, from that one, poisonous tree. In fact, in Judaism, asceticism has always been, at best, a very minor theme. Judaism has also always rejected the idea that people have bodies and souls that can be, as if by a magical knife, split apart. For Jews, humans are always one, indivisible, a single *nephesh* or being. In Judaism, to enjoy the body—within the scope of God’s law—is to feed the soul, while a dance or banquet is as likely to cure a heartsick soul as prayer.

 Christianity should get this. The Christmas stories, for example, are not about how some poor human soul tried to connect with God by renouncing his or her body, but the Christmas story is about how God put on skin and bones to be with humans, because skin and bones are good. Whether it is Jesus as a baby breastfeeding, or Jesus going to Sabbath school as a boy, or Jesus making and drinking wine at a wedding feast, New Testament stories emphasize how Jesus put on and enjoyed a body to do divine things.

 That is how it is with Easter too, why Easter is Christmas all over. When the worst of all possible things happened to Jesus’ body and Jesus died, according to the story, God, Jesus’ father, responded not by taking his spirit into heaven and letting Jesus’ body decay. No, God gave Jesus his body back, so that he could eat and drink and talk with his friends again. You see, bodies are inherently good, perfectly holy! The resurrection of Jesus is a divine affirmation that bodies are home to God, not prisons for the soul.

 Now, there are mysteries here. I cannot argue for a real, historical resurrection any more than I can argue for a literal six-day creation or a virgin birth. Like the Christmas stories, what actually happened in the year 30 AD seems beside the point to me. We were not there, so we’ll never really know.

 But it doesn’t matter because the Easter story is spiritually alive to ultimate truth. The resurrection story embodies the wisdom of the ages—divine wisdom. And it is this: God is on the side of flesh because human flesh is spiritually splendid.

 So, if you want to be spiritual, forget Íte and Anthony and their ilk. If you want to be spiritual attend to your bodies as God is supposed to have attended to Jesus’ body. Enjoy the divine gift of your bodies. Pray with your bodies. Exercise your bodies. Treasure and care for your bodies. Have committed and caring sexual adventures with your bodies. Mourn the death of bodies. Heal bodies. Love, encourage, and help those whose bodies are failing. This is your true spiritual worship. This is Easter.