

Even the Resurrection Bears Scars: A retreat for disabled Christians



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Reading John 20:19-29

Jesus Appears to His Disciples

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

Again, Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

Jesus Appears to Thomas

Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So, the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!”

But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.”

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”

Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!”

Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

Models of Disability – a very basic introduction

There are now more models of disability than those laid out here, but they tend to fall into 3 types – based on:

- a medical/deficit model.
- a social/minority model.
- a religious/health-virtue conflation model.

Those will be the basics that we lay out today.

You may have come into contact with many ways these play out in your communities as there are as many experiences of disability as there are disabled people.

Content warning: The language used in these models can be distressing.

Medical Model

Premise:

Someone is disabled if they have a medical impairment.

This model assumes there is a 'healthy' or 'normal' body against which a person's ability can be measured.

Problem:

The body of the person (or their impairment) is the problem. Impairment is defined by external diagnosis of 'deficiency' or 'abnormality'.

Solution:

Fix the body/mind - bring it back within 'normalised' function.

Main Issues:

- Society remains the same and the disabled person must conform the best they can.
- Access to help and designation as 'disabled' is defined by external agents who use medical criteria to assess that need for help.
- The person is the problem here and they must be the 'best' disabled person they can be.
- Health is conflated with virtue.
- The value of a person is in what they can 'do.'

This model is rejected by most disability campaigners and theologians.

Social Model

Premise:

Disability is something a person experiences because the society they are in does not work for them and is exclusionary.

This model assumes that disability is a construct imposed on a person due to the normalisation and prioritisation of only certain types of bodily experience. It sees that ideas of what has been 'normal' vary across cultures and therefore that 'disability' is not static as in the medical model – no 'normal' exists.

Problem:

Society and physical environment are the problem.

People with various experiences of body and mind are excluded due to these structures, and it is this which causes 'disability'.

Solution:

Social change and structural change.

Societies attitudes and material/physical structures must adapt to include those who have been disabled by current constructs.

Accessibility - to both the physical world and power - must be built into social groups and the material culture to allow people with varying levels of physicality and mental ability to thrive.

Main Issues:

- Society is required to change.
- The social model requires reflection and is complex. Disabled people are not one group measured against a norm, but rather individuals who can self-identify and require unique solutions.
- This model undermines a western capitalist idea that the value of a human is in what they 'produce' or 'do.'
- Adopting a social model requires a radical approach to inclusion which is based in change at all levels of society.
- Health becomes a relative term.
- The value of a person is in who they are.

The (hopefully soon to be old) religious model

There is not one single religious model as theologies vary, but in western Christianity there are a few layers of ideas which have been come to exemplify religious models of disability and sickness. As with the medical model both of these have ‘ideal disabled person’ in mind, which can make it very hard to be honest about our struggles.

The ‘sin-sickness conflation’ or ‘health-virtue conflation’:

- In this illness and impairment are caused by the person suffering from them, (or sometimes an outside evil force).
- This builds on the medical model where there is a ‘normal’ body and everything else is a detraction from that.

Problem:

the person is the problem as they either caused the illness or did not have enough faith to solve the illness.

Solution:

More faith, or ‘Overcoming.’

Main Issues:

- This is based in a theology which says God cannot make anything ‘imperfect’ and where perfection is defined as a very specific type of body.
- The disabled or sick person is a problem because they undermine this idea of God and perfection, so there must be a fault somewhere.
- This often involves a lot of guilt or shame being placed on the disabled person.
- The good disabled person can be positive in overcoming their struggles or deny the issues in order to make sure that faith of others is not disturbed by their presence.

The sick or disabled person as a lesson:

- In this, illness or impairment are a lesson from God to the person or their community in some way – faith? Gratitude?
- Again, the person is an ‘anomaly’ in God’s creation but for a reason.

Problem:

The person is not a ‘problem,’ but they are an example, or inspiration often their illness is an object lesson for others.

Solution:

none is really offered. Learning the lesson and overcoming the obstacles placed in our way.

Main Issues:

- This is based in a theology which assumes all things are given by God in some way.
- There is still a normative body against which the sick or disabled person is compared.
- It requires no real change from the church community or society as the lesson is to be learned by the person and the obstacles are to be overcome.
- Adaptation, accessibility is down to the *graciousness* of the community around them or special intervention from God/Church rather than structural change.

Both these use and/or are the basis for our modern medical model. There is considered to be one normative body against which others are measured.

Our worth is valued against these or 'in spite' of our illnesses or bodily experiences rather than our worth being equal in all things.

The religious models wrestle with overarching theological concepts such as the goodness of God, or the perfection of creation. They construct what 'perfection' or 'goodness' or 'power' look like from a non-disabled point of view.

When the social model of disability meets these a radical shift can take place.

Introduction to Disability Theology.

Disabled people are also theologians that we know best about our experience of God and our voices on that are valuable, and therefore, from within us, we can create ideas.

Disability theology is the attempt by disabled and non-disabled Christians to understand and interpret the gospel of Jesus Christ, God, and humanity against the backdrop of the historical and contemporary experiences of people with disabilities. It has come to refer to a variety of perspectives and methods designed to give voice to the rich and diverse theological meanings of the human experiences of disability.¹

Disability theology isn't merely writing and thinking about disabled people, but thinking about the gospel, who God is, and what our responsibility is to one another in light of the experiences of disabled people.

¹ John Swinton (2011), 'Disability Theology', in Ian MacFarland, David Fergusson, Karen Kilby and Iain Torrance (eds.), Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology (London: Cambridge University Press), 140-141.

Questions and ideas for breakout discussions

The Perfect Body

It is often an idea that there is a perfect body somewhere to which we all are compared – a healthy, whole, correct body. When people consider the body that we will have in the new heaven and new earth, or what it is to be 'made perfect in Christ Jesus', this idea can come into play.

In this group we are going to think about how we feel about our bodies and minds as we may have been told they are not perfect or normal, but also how we can take the idea of being perfected in Christ and look at it from the perspective of our experience of disability.

We get to create ideas about how this so-called perfection is either reached or is made manifest in our church communities now, and to disrupt common ideas about perfection with our unique experiences of God in different bodies and minds.

Possible activities/discussions:

- Word Association: What do you think of when someone says, 'perfect body'? Or 'being made perfect'.
- How has it felt to have our experience or bodies as disabled people used as an example of what *won't* exist in the new heaven and new earth?
- Do you think all disability will gone in heaven?
- We have talked about the idea that Jesus body in its resurrected form still has wounds. How do you feel about that?
- Imagine the new heaven and the new earth with no 'pain and suffering'.
 - What causes pain and suffering here?
 - Could the church get rid of some of that right now for you? How?
- What do you have to teach the church about 'being made perfect in Christ'?

Healing (hopefully from healing to wholeness)

Healing can be a really painful subject for many disabled and chronically ill people in church. Some disabled people do not want healing and do not see a need for such a thing; others, maybe who are chronically ill or have come later to their disability may feel they do want it and are confused that it hasn't happened to them; many of us have had people pray for healing when we did not ask for it leaving us feeling shamed or embarrassed; some of us struggle with the idea of living with pain but a God that is good.

All these experiences are valid.

One aspect of healing that is consistent is that it assumes there is one way to be a 'healed' person, when disabled people know that bodily and mental experiences are incredibly varied.

Your voice about your own experience is really important in this way.

In this time it would be good to think and share about our experience of healing but also to consider a change of language to think about seeking 'wholeness' instead and what difference that language makes.

Activities/discussion:

- Word association: what images/ideas does the word 'healing' bring up for you?
- We talked about Jesus resurrected body having an open wound – what does that mean for you in terms of healing? Is that a hopeful image or a worrying one?
- Your body/mind is unique – what is healing in terms of your body/mind?
- Healing seems to assume a normal to which we should aspire – how do you feel about that?
- What does 'wholeness' mean to you in Christian/spiritual terms?
- What do you think you have to teach the church about wholeness or healing?

What does the bible say about disability?

The Bible has a number of things to say about sickness and bodies that are impaired in some way. It also has examples of bodies that we now would not consider disabled but were disabled at the time – in this way the Biblical texts add weight to the social model.

Illness and bodies are mainly considered in relation to the persons social standing – for example the man who Jesus cures of skin disease is asked to go and tell the priest and do the cleansing rituals. Jesus knows that this is not merely about his bodily healing but his communal (and religious) restoration.

In this group we will discuss some passages where Jesus interacts with people who we would consider disabled in some way, but also discuss your experience with the bible in relation to your disability.

We will also think of what insights our disabilities give us into understanding the biblical passages on illness, sickness, exclusion and holiness.

Activities/discussions:

- How has disability or sickness been explained to you using the Bible?
- What passages worry you in particular?
- Jesus never heals anyone the same way twice – what does that tell us about how we should approach thinking about disabled people and their care?
- Jesus came that we might have life and life to the full
 - what does that mean for you?
- How could churches make that part of the gospel a reality for you?
- How could we help people to understand this in a different way than an ableist one of 'being able to do everything'?
- How has ableism affected the way you approach the bible or sermons where people talk about these issues?