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Opinion | What Good Friday and Easter Mean for Black Americans Like Me

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8-10 minutes

Guest Essay

April 15, 2022



Credit...Detail of "Untitled," Bahati Simoens, 2021. Courtesy of the artist.



I encountered my first corpse in middle school. My cousin Tammy, one of the most beautiful members of our family, died of complications from AIDS at the age of 28. The last time I saw her alive, lesions covered the portions of her frail frame not draped in hospital blankets and IVs.

At the funeral, I struggled to reconcile the body that lay in the coffin with the vibrant person I once knew. I sat there shocked into silence by the sights of aunties collapsing under the weight of grief.

Someone said, “She is in a better place.” I remember thinking, “Her dead body is lying right here in front us.” Her spirit was with Jesus, but we are more than spirits. What about the body that laughed and cried with me? Surely this too was part of my cousin. That part of her was not in a better place. It was beginning the inevitable process of decay.

It’s common, even in Christian circles, to think of the afterlife as a disembodied bliss in a paradise filled with naked baby angels

tickling the strings of harps as our souls bounce from cloud to cloud. But Christianity has never taught a disembodied future in heaven. Our beliefs are more radical.

We believe that one day the entire created world will be transformed to become what God always intended it to be: free of pain, death and sorrow. It will be an earth that still contains some of the things of this life: food, art, mountains, lakes, beaches and culture. There will be hip-hop, spirituals, soul music and grits (with cheese, salt and pepper — not sugar) in the renewed creation. Christians believe that our bodies will be resurrected from the dead to live in this transformed earth. Like the earth itself, these bodies will be transfigured or perfected, but they will still be our bodies.

All of this — the painful, unjust reality of bodily suffering and death in this world and the glorious embodied future that will come in the next — is on my mind as I prepare to observe Good Friday and celebrate Easter. The last few years have borne witness to an overflow of Black suffering. I wish that I had never seen the videos of [Anjanette Young](#) or [Ahmaud Arbery](#), but I have. I could long for a world in which African Americans do not die at a higher rate from Covid-19, but that world does [not yet exist](#). We are hurtling toward an Easter celebration, but for many Black bodies, the last few years have felt like an extended Good Friday. Bodily suffering has been a constant feature of the African American experience. We know well the persistent disregard of our bodies from the auction block to the lynching tree to the knee upon the neck of George Floyd.

Part of my birthright as a Black child of the South was grainy footage of Emmett Till's family fainting at the sight of his [disfigured body](#). His mother wanted an open coffin to show the world what anti-Black racism had done to her child. She hoped that seeing such malice would bring repentance, but we humans are frighteningly capable of ignoring the harm we do one another. We refuse to see. I was also entrusted with images of Coretta Scott King veiled, dignified and caring for her children as the world mourned the death

of her husband.

These funerals, these images of lynched, maimed and martyred Black bodies are a stewardship, a reminder of the high cost of Black freedom.

My cousin wasn't murdered, but as a poor African American woman on Medicaid in the 1980s, she struggled to find doctors who would see her and accept her insurance. In a time when society and the government downplayed the seriousness of AIDS by linking it primarily to the gay community or illicit drug use, her diagnosis was slow in coming. All of these factors contributed to death.

Physical suffering like the kind Tammy experienced is also at the core of the Christian story. Good Friday, the day when Christians remember Jesus' crucifixion, highlights what happened to his body. It was mutilated and put on display. Crucifixion was a tool of Roman imperial terror, a practice largely reserved for slaves, non-citizens or those convicted of high crimes such as treason. It was intended to remind the disinherited about the power that the state had over the bodies of all under its dominion.

James Cone's important work of theology "The Cross and the Lynching Tree" connects the crucifixion of Jesus with the lynching of Black bodies: both are manifestations of evil inflicted as a means of control. Since the time of the [hush harbors](#), Black Christians have found solace in the idea that the God they worshiped knew the trouble we'd seen. He experienced it himself. The hip-hop artist Swoope said, "Christ died in the Blackest way possible, with his hands up and his momma [there watching him.](#)"

But the story of Jesus does not end with his death. In the Gospels, Jesus claimed that he had power over death. Christians believe his resurrection vindicated that claim. The body that God raised was the same body that was on the cross. After his resurrection, Jesus' disciples recognized him. They ate and talked with him. His body was transformed and healed, no longer subject to death, but it still

had the wounds from his crucifixion. There was continuity and discontinuity with the person they knew.

Jesus' resurrection has implications not just for his body, but for all bodies subject to death. Christians believe that what God did for Jesus, he will do for us. The resurrection of Jesus is the forerunner of the resurrection of our bodies and restoration of the earth. There are endless debates and speculations about what type of bodies we will have at the resurrection. Will we all receive the six-packs of our dreams? Will we revert to the bodies we had in our 20s? I do not find these questions that intriguing. What is compelling to me is the clear teaching that our ethnicities are not wiped away at the resurrection. Jesus was raised with his brown, Middle Eastern, Jewish body.

When my body is raised, it will be a Black body. One that is honored alongside bodies of every hue and color. The resurrection of Black bodies will be the definitive rejection of all forms of racism. At the end of the Christian story, I am not saved from my Blackness. It is rendered everlasting. Our bodies, liberated and transfigured but still Black, will be the eternal testimony to our worth.

The question, "What will God do about the disinherited and ripped apart bodies of the world?" can be seen as a central question of religion. Either give me a bodily resurrection or God must step aside. He is of no use to us.

The depiction of the afterlife in which we live apart from our bodies gives physical suffering the final word. If a Black body can be hanged from a tree and burned, never to be restored again, what kind of victory is the survival of a soul? The mob, then, would be able to take something that even God cannot restore. If my cousin's body can be ravaged by disease and lost to her forever, does that not render illness more powerful than God?

I am often asked what gives me hope to go on, given the evil I see

in the world. I find encouragement in a set of images more powerful than the photos, videos and funerals chronicling Black death: the vision of all those Black bodies who trusted in God called back to life, free to laugh, dance and sing. Not in a disembodied spiritual state in some heavenly afterlife but in this world remade by the power of God.

This is the hope that had Black Christians throwing their bodies at wave after wave of anti-Black racism so that their children, even if only for a moment, might rest awhile on the shore. For them, belief in God's power over death fueled their resistance. It may be a fool's hope, but I believe that their struggle was not in vain. I trust that all those bodies engulfed in the sea of hatred will one day play with their descendants on a beach, singing the songs of Zion with no more waves to threaten them.