

Luke 24:36-48

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’³⁷ They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost.³⁸ He said to them, ‘Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?’³⁹ Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.’⁴⁰ And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.⁴¹ While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, ‘Have you anything here to eat?’⁴² They gave him a piece of broiled fish,⁴³ and he took it and ate in their presence.

44 Then he said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.’⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures,⁴⁶ and he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day,⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.’⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things.

SPIRITS DON’T HAVE FLESH AND BONE

I suppose I’m like many of you in that when I was young the thought of ghosts terrified me. I had not *seen* a ghost, but I heard all the stories around the campfires with various youth groups, I saw a slew of movies about ghosts, complete with the creepy music and the ghouls jumping out of dark places. I had my share of nightmares and plenty of hours lying in bed with my eyes open and my heart pounding, panicking with every creak that our old house produced. Eventually I grew braver. I didn’t *stop believing* in ghosts; I just rationalized that because they were non-material that they couldn’t really hurt me. That belief was born out of what I had seen in every ghost movie I had ever seen. Anyone who met some tragic fate at the hands of a ghost didn’t really die as a result of any physical assault by the ghost but usually lost their footing as a result of being scared, and would fall out of 30-story building or down a long staircase or some such thing. So I figured my strategy, were I to meet a ghost, would be to keep my balance and watch my step, and exercise my cardiovascular system so I could indeed endure the shock of *seeing* a specter. I made it through childhood without any encounters with a ghost and thus never got to apply my strategy, but I think it would have worked well, and being so convinced I have lost any fear of ghosts. Once I actually went searching for a legendary ghost who made his rounds in a neighboring county...but that’s another story.

Spirits don’t have flesh and bone. The resurrected Jesus reminds his disciples of this when he appears to them in the upper room. He invites them to touch his hands and feet. He ate some broiled fish in their presence. The disciples didn’t say anything this entire passage; perhaps they couldn’t. I don’t know if they were more terrified seeing a resurrected teacher than they would have been seeing a ghost. Nonetheless Jesus finishes eating, then he explains to them how this could have happened, opening their minds to the Old Testament, then declares that they are

witnesses to this and implies that *somebody* needs to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sin in his name *to all nations*. I wonder who he had in mind?

Now let's be honest here; our minds need to be opened a bit, don't they? Because if we make this proclamation to the nations, that Jesus is God's only Son who died for our sins and resurrected on the third day in order to save us from sin and death and you need to repent and know that God forgives you your sins in Jesus' name and you will be saved from sin and death, that leaves a lot of nations with a lot of questions. And if you put a little meat on bones of that proclamation, you may get people to accept Christ as their Savior, but how firm is the foundation of their faith? The disciples had the benefit of spending three years with Jesus before his death and getting a house call from him after the resurrection. We've had neither, and so we are not only prone to not fully appreciate the significance of the resurrection, but we're also less likely to be witnesses to the resurrection. Indeed we don't even know *how* to be witnesses. I think that's why so many "Christians" come to church but twice a year – they know it's supposed to be important, but they're not exactly convinced enough to commit more time or energy to appreciating Jesus Christ, and unfortunately that can only come when they commit enough time to having their minds opened to understanding Jesus Christ, and the truth is that we can all afford to have our minds more opened to understand the scripture.

There's my plug for attending church and Bible studies.

Because if we don't put in the time and the energy into reading scripture and having our minds opened to the significance of Jesus, we will most certainly distort scripture and minimize Jesus. This morning I'd like to share one example of how we do this, how we minimize Jesus. It's a very significant truth that Jesus was resurrected in body and didn't just appear as a ghost to his disciples. It's the same reason that his incarnation was significant. God could have simply communicated to us through a ghost, telling us to repent and that our sins are forgiven. But it is significant that Jesus didn't just appear as a ghost because by entering this world in the flesh, God is affirming this world in the flesh, and showing us how to live this life in the flesh, and he is dissuading us from thinking in purely *spiritual* terms. Let me explain. As a pastor, I hear many "confessions" from people, mainly those who don't attend any church, about what they believe. Often these people describe themselves as *spiritual*, but not religious. Usually their *spirituality* takes the form of self-improvement – good diet, exercise, yoga, meditation, even prayer – nothing wrong with any of these practices. But that is the extent of their *spirituality*. They worship God in their own way, on their own terms, and seem to be quite satisfied with their *spirituality*. They have God well-contained, easily managed, non-threatening, and they like their God to be that way. Some even profess to worship Jesus, a non-threatening, unimposing Jesus who condones their lifestyle and helps them feel good about themselves.

But they are deceiving themselves. They are worshiping the part of Jesus that is most palatable to them, the one who tells them how much God loves them, the one who promises to take them to heaven someday, not the one who died and resurrected **to free them from sin** and bring them **new** life. They worship the Jesus who dwells in some other dimension, some other place, a place unlike this crazy world where people are fighting and killing each other and the only way we can avoid that is by living behind a fence and having a big dog (Archie doesn't do me much good), not the Jesus who taught us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, not the

Jesus who dared to reach out and touch the leper, to dine with the sinner, to live among the poor, not the Jesus who said, “if you have two coats, give one away.” That’s not the Jesus they worship. They aren’t worshipping the Jesus who said, “I have come that you might have life, and have it in abundance.” They think that Jesus meant that they should store up wealth, when anyone who knows scripture and knows Jesus knows that the abundant life is life blessed with love and friendships and joyful fellowship with all people and celebration of life and the beauty of creation. Yes, it’s significant that Jesus came back *in the flesh* because what he taught us to do, if we truly are his disciples, is to live in solidarity with others who live in the flesh, to make a difference in this world, not to make the most for ourselves and hope that we have just as much in the next life.

Jesus tells his disciples that *repentance and forgiveness of sins* is to be proclaimed. A lot of folks have forgotten that first thing; repentance. Someone accuses us of anything wrong we hire a lawyer. There are probably a lot of people who are hoping that they can take their lawyer with them when they face God’s judgment; “Well, your honor (God), my client pleads not guilty.” It may be entirely true that God will dismiss your case and bring you through those pearly gates, *but that’s different from declaring you innocent*. And it’s great to come to church and confess your sins, but confession is different from repentance. Confession is simply admitting that you sin; repentance is taking those hard steps to stop sinning NOW. And sinning is more than cursing or thinking dirty thoughts – we sin every time we turn our backs on the suffering of our fellow human beings.

And repentance is when we learn what true faith is all about, because you find that there are some sins you can’t shake unless you place your trust in Jesus to be true to his word and take them away from you. Faith is when you say, “Jesus, I can’t seem to break this cycle of sin; please help me.” And I’m not talking about acts of piety; anyone can stop cursing, or saying rude things to other people. Most people can discipline themselves to read the Bible or pray before meals. I’m talking about walking the walk that Jesus walked, putting other people before yourself *always*, giving yourself fully to God and to one another, and I could care less if you curse from time to time, as long as you curse righteously.

No, Jesus did not come back as a spirit; he came back as flesh and bone, because in order to finish the work he started things need to happen in this world. Ghosts can’t feed the hungry. Ghosts can’t heal the sick. Ghosts can’t dig wells to provide clean drinking water to people who are dying from dysentery. Ghosts can’t lobby to change laws that discriminate against people based upon the color of their skin, the language that they speak, or the value of their material wealth. Ghosts can’t be much comfort to those who are truly suffering, because we can look at a ghost and say, “How can you feel the pain that I suffer?” But flesh and blood can. Paul declared, “I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live *but Christ who lives within me*.” Christ came in flesh and blood because flesh and blood matter. Flesh and blood can heal this sick planet, but only flesh and blood wherein Christ dwells, because *our* flesh is weak. We’re good at partial commitment, at making token gestures to bring change. In essence we’re good at compromising our faith in Christ, but Jesus asks us for all. We need to fully commit ourselves to Jesus Christ.

And that is one mission of the Church; we stand as a community of disciples, some better disciples than others, to lead one another, encourage one another, to keep one another accountable, to keep us growing in our discipleship, *why?* So we can be blessed to see the power of the resurrected Christ as he continues to heal and feed and establish God's kingdom *using our hands, and our legs, and our gifts, and our resources.*

Ghosts can't really do much to hurt this world, and folks who confine their discipleship to *spiritual* practices can't do much to really *help* this world. Our Savior lives in the flesh, in *our* flesh. Let Christ truly reign in your heart so that your arms and legs, your hands and feet, may be dedicated to establishing a kingdom of peace and justice on earth as it is in heaven.