

Do you believe in ghosts?

Luke 24:36-48

April 26, 2009

Do you believe in ghosts?

They did. Or, at least, they were starting to when they saw ... Well, what did they see? They saw a man, or something like a man, a figure, an appearance, the form of a man, something, someone, that looked like ... but it couldn't be!

It couldn't be! He's dead! He's dead... So, it must be ... a ghost!

Their imaginations were so overwhelmed by what they saw but could not make sense of, that the rest of their senses shut down. They didn't hear his words, "Peace be with you." Or, at least, the words and their meaning didn't register with them. Peace? Right ... They were terrified!

Do you blame them? How would you feel, what would you do, if you were in their place? If one you knew to be dead, or something looking like him, was suddenly there? How do you feel? What are you doing? Because you are in their place!

Do you believe in ghosts? They were starting to ...

What is a ghost?

A ghost is an apparition, something that appears real, but is not.

Or it is an imaginative projection, something that is not really "out there," but something that comes from within us, something our minds "see" because our minds have created it.

Or a ghost is some kind of "visible" manifestation of something "invisible," a sensory representation of spirit, a sensory representation of something soulish.

Or a ghost is the remnant, the residual aura, of someone who has died, a manifestation of the presence of a person who no longer possesses a body.

But, in any case, in every case, a ghost is something insubstantial, something inhuman, something alien, something otherworldly. And when the disciples saw -- whatever it could be standing among them! -- that's what they thought they were seeing ... a ghost.

But why? Why would anyone believe they were seeing a ghost? What reason would anyone have for thinking they might someday see a ghost, or for believing that other people have seen ghosts, or for concluding that something they saw or something they heard must have been a ghost?

It might be a way to explain the unexplainable, a means of offering some kind of explanation for a phenomenon, for an event, for a change in circumstances that we otherwise cannot account for or accept.

Or it might be a way to get around death or our fear of death, a way to believe that death is not what it seems to be, that it is not an end, that something, something of a person, survives death.

Or it might be a way to lay blame on someone else, on something else, for our trials and troubles, a way of passing on the responsibility for my failures and frustrations and fears onto "it" or "them." "Something out there doesn't like me! Something out there has it in for me! There's nothing I can do about it!"

So they thought they were seeing a ghost, something insubstantial, something inhuman, something otherworldly. They were ready to believe that was what they were seeing, because they could not fathom any other possible explanation.

But they were wrong! What they were seeing was not a ghost. And Jesus -- that's who it was! it was Jesus! -- Jesus took great pains to prove it to them.

Feel me! Does a ghost have flesh and bones?

And when they still could not get their minds around what they were seeing, he asked them ... for something to eat!

OK. So you are one of the disciples. What are you thinking at this point? You've touched his hands and his arms. You handed him the piece of fish and watched him eat. What do you make of it?

What do you make of it? You, sitting here in the church pew? What do you make of this story? Think carefully about your answer, because this story, this event, this reality, this man, is the very heart of our faith. We are followers of Jesus, the one who lived, for us. We are followers of Jesus, the one who died, for us. We are followers of Jesus, the one who was raised to life, by God, for us.

Raised to life! Not appearing to his disciples as a spirit, an apparition, a ghost. Not a projection of their wishful, hopeful, still undaunted collective imagination. Not something insubstantial or unreal, but raised to life! A living, breathing, flesh and bone, fish-eating Jesus, standing there among them!

OK. If he is standing there, if it's not a ghost, what does that mean? It means something has happened -- it means God has made something happen -- that changes everything! The worst that the powers of sin and death could do to one human being, to one human being who stands with and for all human beings, has been utterly undone! Entirely overcome! Completely vanquished!

Goodness wins. Life wins. God wins.

And that changes everything! Look at the world, with resurrection eyes, and what do you see? Do you see the power of life reviving tired bodies and broken hearts and sagging spirits? Do you see the power of love making enemies into friends and strangers into siblings? Do you see people, a gathered community of people, a church, committed followers of Jesus who believe not in ghosts, not in the hopes and dreams of an other world, but believe Jesus is alive and on the move, making his presence known in us, making his presence known through us ... in this world!

We thought the world was doomed. We thought the world was doomed to dissension and division, to corruption and greed, to the pervasive and lethal effects of pride and envy and selfishness and prejudice.

But it is not! The power of sin and the power of death are broken! We do not have to fear either sin or death! We do not have to accept "inevitable" consequences! The world is not destined to remain as it is! It will be made new! It is being made new!

And that's good news. It's a message about repentance and forgiveness, about turning away from sin, about choosing a better way, about being freed from the effects of sin, about living gladly, hopefully, purposefully. It's a message for ... well, who is the message for? It's a message for all nations! A message for all people! And who are the messengers? You are. I am.

It comes down to this. For the disciples, it was easier to believe in a ghost than to believe that the one standing before them was Jesus, Jesus alive, Jesus raised from death. And the same is true of us. It is easier to believe in a ghost, in an otherworldly Jesus, in a Jesus who invites us to join him in some other place after we die, a place (you can call it heaven) where the souls of those no longer living are gathered.

It is easier for us to believe in ghosts, to believe in heaven, than it is to believe in resurrection, to believe that a flesh and bone Jesus lives, to believe that God is in the business of bringing dead things to life ... here and now!

And at least part of the reason it is easier to believe in ghosts is this: if you do believe in resurrection, you must believe that things as they are can be changed. You must believe that things as they are are changing. And you must believe that you are called to be an agent of that change! You must believe that you can be changed. You must believe that you must be changed!

Jesus said: "You are witnesses! You have seen what God can do! You have seen what God is doing! Now go tell the story!"

Go tell the story ... and keep telling the story! Bring the transforming power of resurrection to bear on the broken places in your life. Bring the healing power of the resurrection to bear on the broken people in your community. Bring the reconciling power of the resurrection to bear on the broken relationships in your world.

Do you see what it means if it is Jesus, not a ghost, but Jesus, raised to life, standing there before you? Seeing a ghost is a strange and curious phenomenon, but seeing a ghost changes nothing. Seeing Jesus changes everything!

"Peace be with you," Jesus said. Peace be with you, whoever you are and wherever you are. And peace go with you, wherever you go!