

HAUNTED

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Luke 24:36b-48

I don't believe in ghosts. Let me say that again, I do not believe in ghosts, spirits, haints, haunts, phantoms, or anything else like that. In my opinion, those television shows about ghost hunters are pure baloney. Now, having said that, in the interest of full disclosure, I am compelled to confess that I have seen a ghost.

When Courtney and I got married, I had a dog. He was with us for many years and he died at the ripe age of 15. In the final months of his life we spent a lot of time taking care of an old dog. He lost his sight, then his hearing, and finally his kidneys failed. In July of that year, our daughter was down in Alabama staying with her grandparents and visiting cousins and I needed to go get her and bring her home. It would be a three-day trip—a day driving down, a day with the family, and a day driving back to Tennessee. On the day that I left, the dog was so weak that I strongly suspected that he would not be there when I returned.

On the second day of my trip, all the family was planning to eat dinner together, so I went back to where I was staying to clean up for the evening. I was all alone. And as I was getting ready, a light glimmered in the corner of my left eye at the very edge of my peripheral vision. It was a pure white light and lasted only a brief moment. It could have been anything—a stray reflection through the window, a misfire of my optic nerves, even my imagination. I really don't know. And I don't care what the explanation might be because I immediately recognized the relevance of the light. It was my dog saying goodbye. When my wife called a short time later to tell me our dog had died, I wasn't surprised. I already knew. He had been to see me. I may not believe in ghosts, but, yes, I have seen one.

Our scripture reading for today is something of a ghost story, or, more accurately, as we shall see, it is a not-ghost story.

As we read in the final chapters of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus was executed in Jerusalem. His corpse was placed in a temporary tomb. Three days after his death, early in the morning following the Sabbath, some women went to the tomb to prepare the body for a proper burial. When they arrived, they discovered the tomb to be open and the body missing. Two men in dazzling clothes appeared before the women and informed them that Jesus was not there, that he had been raised. The women rushed back to tell the others about what they had witnessed, but the others did not believe them.

Later that same day, two of Jesus' followers were walking home from Jerusalem. As they walked, they were joined by a stranger who asked what they had been talking about so intently. The two were astonished that this stranger was

not aware of Jesus and the events in Jerusalem that week. That evening, as the three travelers gathered for dinner, the stranger *took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.* Of course, it had been Jesus walking with them. He then vanishes from their sight and the two immediately rush back to Jerusalem to tell the others.

Back in Jerusalem, while the two are describing their day's encounter, Jesus himself appears and addresses the group with his message, *Peace be with you.* The group, understandably, is terrified because they believe they are looking at a ghost or a spirit. After all, they had watched Jesus die. This couldn't be him. Jesus asks why they are frightened, why their hearts are full of doubt. "Look at my hands and my feet," he tells them. "Touch me and see. Is a ghost real like this?"

On the one hand, the group is overjoyed that Jesus is alive and with them. But naturally, they are skeptical. How could this be? And while they are contemplating Jesus' presence, Jesus asks if they have anything for him to eat. So, they give him pieces of cooked fish and he eats while they watch him. He must be real; what kind of spirit consumes solid food?

Jesus then reminds the disciples of what he had previously told them—how the scriptures would be fulfilled. He says to them, *Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses to these things.*

As I said earlier, this is a not-ghost story. The Jesus that appears to the two on the road to Emmaus is not a ghost. The Jesus who appears to all the disciples and others is not a ghost. He is real, he is alive, he is flesh and bone, he is hungry. God did not send a spirit; God raised a person to full life.

Earlier this week, Michael was asking me what I would be preaching on today. I told him about this passage and then jokingly added that I was working hard not to include a reference to "Ghost." "What's that?" he asked. "The movie," I said, "with Demi Moore and Patrick Swayze and Whoopi Goldberg." "Don't know it," he said. "Must be before my time." I'm getting old. I'm starting to know how a ghost feels.

From the beginning, the church fought the rejection of Jesus' bodily resurrection. People had a hard time wrapping their heads around this reality. Dead things stay dead. There were the Gnostics and the Docetists and the Arians and others who all had different explanations for who Jesus was. They all in different ways rejected the belief in God's great power of salvation and life.

Jesus would remain with his disciples teaching them more about God's kingdom and helping them understand the scriptures and who he was. Eventually, he would leave them again and ascend into heaven. He would be gone but his worlds would

haunt them. However, before he goes, Jesus charges his followers to be witnesses to all that has happened.

In the same way, we all should be witnesses. A witness is not just someone who sees something happen, a witness tells what they've seen. If you witness a crime but don't testify about it, then you are not a witness, you are just a bystander. In the church, the followers of Christ are called to be witnesses, not bystanders. What do we witness? We witness the cosmic story of Jesus of Nazareth, the son of God, the Messiah, who suffered and died and was raised so that we might enjoy salvation. We witness with our testimony and we witness by serving in his holy name.

You may argue that we have not actually seen Jesus, that we have not touched his wounds. No, maybe not, but the disciples did and they witnessed to others and those to others until their testimony reached through the centuries to us. We know their testimony is true because we've felt it. We know these things just as I know that my dog came to me to say goodbye. I believe it. I feel it in my bones.

Jesus is not gone. Jesus is here with us. He is in our acts of compassion. Jesus is in this church. He is not a spirit but his living presence haunts us just the same.

When we gather here each week, our worship experience not unlike the experience of the disciples when Jesus appeared to them. Here, each week, we encounter the risen Christ. We arrive here burdened with the doubts and fears we've accumulated through the week and we find Christ. We recite the scriptures and hear the Word and proclaim the good news of what God is doing in our lives. We eat with Christ, breaking the bread of Holy Communion. And then, just as the hearts and minds of the disciples were opened by the Holy Spirit, so the Spirit sets our hearts on fire for the gospel.

With hearts on fire, Christ sends his people out as witnesses to share this wonderful promise. We witness because we have seen and experienced something that we cannot contain. We are compelled to stand and testify. We cannot run away as if we've seen a ghost.

What is it that we witness? We witness to the life-changing experience that we find in God through Christ. We witness to the power of resurrection and renewal. We witness to the confidence that God loves us and cares for us.

At the end, Jesus imposed a mission upon his people. It is a mission embodied in the scripture and catalyzed not by any ghost, but by the Holy Ghost, the Holy Spirit. As Christians, we are to proclaim to all people the *repentance and forgiveness of sins* that are found in our Savior.

That is our calling; that is our mission—to testify to the world the joy that we have experienced. May we never forget our calling; may our divine mission haunt us all our lives.