

“A Ghost Does Not Have Flesh and Bones”
Luke 24:36-48; I John 3:1-7; Psalm 4
Easter 3

Psalm 4

{1} Answer me when I call, O God of my right! You gave me room when I was in distress. Be gracious to me, and hear my prayer. {2} How long, you people, shall my honor suffer shame? How long will you love vain words, and seek after lies?

{3} But know that the LORD has set apart the faithful for himself; the LORD hears when I call to him. {4} When you are disturbed, do not sin; ponder it on your beds, and be silent.

{5} Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in the LORD. {6} There are many who say, “O that we might see some good! Let the light of your face shine on us, O LORD!” {7} You have put gladness in my heart more than when their grain and wine abound. {8} I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O LORD, make me lie down in safety.

I John 3:1-3

{1} See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. {2} Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. {3} And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

Luke 24:36-48

{36b} Jesus [came and] 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.”

The Sermon

There is a marvelous, national organization of Presbyterian women, of which my Mom and some of you are members, called P.E.O.—which my pastor used to say stands for, “Presbyterians Eat Out.”

A minister was inviting all of us at a presbytery meeting to come to the homecoming at his church, where to guarantee what everybody already knows about small churches, he said, “I’ve lost about 2,000 pounds as minister of this church, and I’m still 50 pounds heavier than I was when I got here.”

I vowed then and there that I would *never* let that happen to me.

The importance to the church of breaking bread together cannot be overstated. And it’s not just about how good it is or how much there is or how good it makes you feel to eat dinner with somebody else, or 117 somebody-elses.

From the earliest times in the church, it was about taking a common meal together. Eating is one of the few things that is absolutely necessary for human life. We take it for granted that we all breathe together, although I’m told there have been Presbyterian worship services where it would have been kind of hard for an outsider to tell.

But it’s no mistake that our ritual, our language, is all about the feast, and when we sit at table together, and when we break bread together, and when we are all gathered for the great banquet.

Fred Craddock says of this 24th chapter of Luke—the part that comes right before today’s passage, when two disciples are on the road to Emmaus; and the risen Christ meets them but they don’t recognize him; and as a stranger, he tells them how the things that have happened have all been in accordance with the promise of the scriptures; and they get to where they were going and they bring him in and ask him to sit at table with them; and they give him some of the bread they’ve brought with them, and he blesses it and breaks it and gives it to them, and then their eyes are opened, and they recognize him—“They prepared supper, and his presence made it a sacrament” (p. 236).

Without his presence, our bread and grape juice on a Sunday morning communion service is just bread and grape juice.

But Jesus’ presence makes it a sacrament. And with his presence, a family night supper becomes something more than a family night supper. And two church members eating lunch together becomes more than two church members eating lunch together. And youth groups eating pizza and laughing so hard that 7UP comes out their noses becomes something more than that, too.

And then in today’s passage, Jesus comes to the disciples again, when they’re all in the house in Jerusalem.

And here they are, in slack-jawed astonishment and wonder, that this Jesus is risen from the dead, that the vertical of the kingdom of heaven has somehow crossed right at this very kitchen table with the horizontal of the earth, *at this spot*, and the Almighty, the Most Holy, victorious lamb, the Son of Almighty God Most High, says unto them,

“You guys got anything to eat?”

While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” (Luke 24:41).

And now he has made the sacramental moment back into a meal.

That is *so* Luke. The Physician. Mr. Everything-is-flesh-and-blood; you’re either poor or you’re not poor; you’re either hungry or you’re not hungry; you’re either sick or you’re not sick; none of the in-between “Well, maybe we’re poor in a *spiritual* sense.”

For Luke it’s always a question of people’s physical well-being.

And physically, Jesus, who on Good Friday was completely dead, is now so completely alive that he wants something to eat.

He is not a ghost.

There was some talk in the early church that maybe he was a ghost when he came back.

He was not a ghost. He was not a shadow of his former self; he was his former self restored to life, victorious over death.

This is not a metaphysical encounter, but a physical one. It was not an illusion, not a dream, but flesh and blood.

And then, all too soon, dinner was over.

And now we are the physical body of Christ.

But in a way, not much has changed. The world and its people—even those who believe—aren’t really sure what to make of the body of Christ.

Is it flesh and blood? Or is it only a ghost?

If it’s flesh and blood, then the people who encounter it should know that it is a living organism. But do they always know?

A ghost is just a shadow, a vision without substance, a passing apparition. A ghost can’t really do any harm. A ghost can’t really do anything at all, except remind you of the life it used to be.

The Ghost Church stands in the community, and people know it’s there; but if they notice it at all, it’s mainly as a point of interest. The ghost church doesn’t threaten anything about society; you can go on indulging easy hatreds and the sub-human thrill of violence and a lifetime of trying to get more than you give and not really caring too much about anybody but yourself. You can indulge all of that—as a citizen, as a society, as a government—and not worry about the ghost church, because it’s only an apparition; the slightest breeze will blow it apart.

The ghost church is really just good for a scare once in a while. That's what a Lutheran told me in Chicago one time—if he didn't come home on Sunday feeling really guilty about something, he didn't feel like he'd been to church yet. He hadn't been adequately scared that day; hadn't even had that delicious but harmless shiver that a good ghost story around the campfire can give you.

The ghost story is always fun because you know it's all a bunch of baloney anyway. There's no such thing as a ghost.

And out there in a world that teems with the death and darkness that Jesus came to expunge, and which lacks the things Jesus demanded, they have a right to ask—is the body of Christ, the church, anything more than a ghost?

And I suppose you and I together could compile a whole long list that would step on absolutely everyone's toes, but we all have some experience, well-documented, un-regretted experience, of treating the church as a ghost.

A ghost can be ignored when it's inconvenient—or even just less convenient, say, than four or five other pleasurable alternatives, such as a sunny day, or a rainy day, or unexpected company, or you're just too tired. And sometimes, the pastor is not bent over the open gospel, spectacles in one hand, pencil in the other, prayer lists stuffed into shirt pockets.

We justify it by pointing to the vast majority of the time when we treat the church as the living body of Christ, deserving and demanding our utmost care and attention.

But sometimes, even we who serve it have regarded the body of Christ as nothing more than a ghost.

On Easter morning, before the sunrise service in Carolina Beach, I was standing next to my friend Steve Hall, the minister at St. Paul's Methodist. And the sun hadn't quite peeked out above the horizon, but there was a spectacular red glow all along the skyline, reflecting on the ocean. And I was just about to say, "Steve, I can't figure out why I'm not out here every morning," but he had started to speak first, and he said, "Why am I not out here every morning?"

John, the most sacramental of the four evangelists, puts this scene with the risen Jesus on the beach; and Jesus has built a little campfire, and he asks the disciples returning from their morning trawl to bring some fish to add to the ones he's already got on the grill, along with bread that he has provided.

But Luke has it happening in the house in Jerusalem where the disciples are gathered, and it's evening.

In both cases, Christ's presence is as real as it gets, and he is so alive that, like you and me and every human being in the world, he needs something to eat.

As you and I, members of the body of Christ, try to minister to the world around us, may we remember the real, tangible, physical needs of this world that God loved so much that God gave God's only Son.

We are not ghosts. We can do things, build things, make things, share things.

And occasionally, when we have done our daily work for the physical well-being of this absolutely real world, we will have the privilege of sitting at table together, in the presence of the one who opens our eyes, and makes our breaking bread together a sacrament.

Let us pray...

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