

SERMON: “A Bible Study Not a Ghost Story”

April 26, 2009

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: Eternal God, in the resurrection of your Son Jesus you have overcome death and opened to us the way of eternal life. Grant now, through the reading and preaching of your word, that in our ongoing celebration of Christ's resurrection, we, too, may be raised by the power of your Spirit to lives of righteousness; through Christ our risen, crucified Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson: Hosea 6:1-3

New Testament Lesson: Luke 24:36-48

Have any of you ever seen a ghost? Or have you ever had an experience that was so strange, so out of the ordinary, that it made the hair stand up on your arms? I have had some strange “coincidences,” that weren't really coincidences at all. But as far as I can remember, I've never experienced anything so strange that it left me startled for years. But some of you have. Some of you have told me your stories, and so have a number of other friends over the years.

Tony Abbott, who for years taught English literature at Davidson College, wrote a moving poem about the two white dogs, the two Salukis, that showed up in the drive way of Bob Stone's home in Valle Crucis on the day he died. In Egyptian mythology white Salukis were said to escort the departed to the realm of the dead. The day Bob died, the dogs were there. After his death, the dogs were never seen again. Where did they come from? Where did they go? Strange...

I had a fraternity brother in college to whom strange things seemed to happen all the time. When I was in my first pastorate in Lexington, KY, Bruce was a staff writer for the *Louisville Courier Journal*. Just before I left Lexington, he came to teach journalism at the University of KY. While he was in Lexington, Bruce wrote a story on unidentified flying objects, UFOs. He interviewed people who told of their close encounters and in some cases their abductions by alien beings. He was convinced there was something to it. On the evening after Bruce had driven to Louisville to file the story with his editor, on his way back to Lexington that night, he says that suddenly a bright light hovered over his car for a while, then took off at incredible speed. To him it was as if the aliens were saying, “Good job! You're right—we're here.” Strange!...

When I was in high school, I remember being fascinated by the paranormal. I was addicted to *The Twilight Zone* and loved tales of the supernatural, like that of “the Grey Man of Pawley's.” Have you ever noticed that the Low Country of SC seems to be the setting for an unusually large number of ghost stories? Why, I don't know. Strange...

Ghost stories are not just entertaining. They can serve to open our minds to the possibility that there may well be dimensions of life beyond the realm of our senses. They remind us, in the words of Hamlet, that “there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy.” We live in a culture that too often flattens out its

definition of reality. The only things we believe that are real are those we can touch and count and weigh and measure. And so it is important for us to keep being reminded that reality may be far deeper, more mysterious than anything we have ever experienced. Even your dog hears sounds you do not hear, and smells things you do not smell, and experiences things you can scarcely imagine. Yes, there are more things in heaven and earth than a scientific reductionism can ever account for.

But as entertaining as ghost stories and tales of the supernatural may be, all the writers of the Gospels in the New Testament take great pains to insist that, whatever else it is, the **resurrection of Jesus is not a ghost story**. It is the church's witness to a **fully embodied reality**.

It is not hard to see why the gospel writers refused to let the resurrection of Jesus be viewed as a ghost story. To see it as a ghost story would be to turn it into something completely different from what it is. The resurrection is not merely a symbol for some new religious experience the disciples may have had after Jesus' death. It is not just another name for his ongoing spiritual presence in the their hearts and minds. The resurrection is most assuredly not something the disciples made up to keep alive their fading memories of Jesus. The resurrection is about the **transformed body** of Jesus being raised bodily from the tomb by the power of the same God who "in the beginning" called all things into being out of nothing.

When the risen Jesus made himself known to his disciples, in a way that startled and terrified them all, the simplest explanation they could have given for what they had experienced would have been to say that they had seen his ghost, his spirit.

Try to image yourself back into the shoes of the first disciples. It is very late at night on that first Easter. Suddenly two disciples come running breathlessly into the room where you are in hiding. They tell a bizarre story of how the risen Lord had walked unrecognized along side of them, and how it was not until "he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them," that "their eyes were opened and they recognized him." But as soon as they did, "**he vanished from their sight**." If anyone had told you a story like that, wouldn't you have assumed either that in their grief they had lost their minds, or that it was his spirit, his ghost, they had seen?

But to deepen the mystery, suppose that suddenly the risen Jesus had walked right through the locked door of that room you were in, and had breathed on you his Spirit, and said, "**Peace be with you**." Again what else would you think but that it was his ghost you were seeing? That was the way almost anyone at the time would have interpreted such an strange experience. Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried...and now it was his ghost that had come back--the ghost of the crucified Jesus.

But that is exactly what all what the gospel writers deny! They all insist that it was not the *ghost* of Jesus that the terrified disciples experienced. It was the **risen, transformed body of their crucified Lord** that startled them out of their wits. It was the

risen Christ himself who invited them to see his hands and feet and to touch him, in order to see that he was no ghost at all. In words that are remarkably similar to those we read last Sunday from the Gospel of John, Luke has Jesus say to his startled disciples, **“Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? 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.”**

At that Luke says that “while in their joy (the disciples) were **disbelieving and still wondering,**” Jesus said to them, **‘Have you anything here to eat?’** They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence.” I don’t quite know what to make of that. It seems so common, so ordinary, so undramatic? There is almost a childish element to it...as Jesus stoops to whatever level is needed to enable frightened, disbelieving disciples like us to believe.

Whatever we make of it, I think this is Luke’s way of insisting that the risen Christ was no phantom; he was no disembodied ghost. He was **real**—real enough to be touched, real enough, if need be, to eat a piece of fish in their presence. However strange the story of the resurrection is, and will always be—and, remember, it was even stranger to those who first experienced it than it is to us--however strange the resurrection of Jesus may be, it is important that we understand clearly that the gospel of the resurrection is no ghost story. It is the announcement of a **unique event in history**—the raising of the body of the crucified Jesus from death to life eternal.

If that is true—if Jesus was indeed raised **bodily**—then we in the church have to careful not to overly **“spiritualize”** the gospel. Sometimes we give the impression that all that really matters is how we think and feel and pray, in other words, what we do our **interior lives**—and not what we do with our **bodies**, or how we honor and care for the bodies of others, or how we care for the body of the world. Religion, some would say, is about cultivating one’s own private spirituality, so as to escape from the messiness of this fallen world. But Pharaoh and Pilate and Herod and all the tyrants of the world love that kind of “spirituality.” It never threatens or challenges their death grip on power. The tyrants in power always breath a sigh of relief whenever we attend more to our own warm, fuzzy “spirituality” than to what is being done to the bodies of others.

During the time around the American Civil War, our Southern Presbyterian forbearers promulgated what they called **“the distinctive doctrine of the spirituality of the church.”** The leaders of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederacy insisted that the church had no business addressing political and economic issues like slavery. The church should stick to “spiritual issues”--as if somehow the way we treat or enslave the bodies of others were not a matter of great spiritual concern to the God of the Exodus and Easter. But through the bold and courageous leadership of ones like E. T. Thompson and A.J. McKelway, we in time came to realize that authentic biblical spirituality is always concerned with what we do in the bodies God has given us and what we do with and to the bodies of others. In the life of biblical faith, bodies matter.

All the writers of the New Testament go to great lengths to insist that Jesus was not merely raised in spirit. He was raised **bodily**, as the first fruits of God's great renewal of all creation. For the Christian faith, grounded as it is in the bodily resurrection of the crucified Jesus, **bodies matter!** What we do with our own bodies, and with the bodies of others, and with the body of God's creation itself, matters. It matter tremendously and ultimately. Bodies matter!

The bodily resurrection of Jesus is not just something we celebrate one day in the year—with all the “smells and bells” of Easter, as our Anglican friends like to say. The resurrection of Jesus is something we celebrate every Lord's Day—every time we gather in worship. The resurrection of Jesus is that toward which the whole story of the Bible had been moving from the first moment God breathed the breath of life into the creature he had fashioned from the clay of the earth.

Across all the pages scripture the Bible tells one great Story—one vast and wondrous narrative of God's gift of Life and God's conquest of Sin and Death. We tend to read little snippets of the Bible. But we need to step back at times and pay attention to the whole sweep of the biblical drama. When we do, what we discover is that at every point in the story, whenever it seems that God's purposes have come to a dead-end, time and time again God **“makes a way out of no way.”**

Out of nothing, God calls all things into being with a Word. Out of the barrenness of old Sarah, married to a man who was “as good as dead,” is born Isaac, promised child of Laughter. Out of the evil jealousy of his bothers, Joseph is thrown into a pit and sold into slavery by his brothers, but he is raised by God to the position of second in command to Pharaoh. And later, when the Hebrews are enslaved in Egypt, the Lord, with a mighty hand and outstretched arm, leads them from bondage to freedom in the Promised Land. And centuries later, when Israel is in exile in Babylon, an all hope has been crushed, the Lord inspires the prophet Isaiah of the exile to “Comfort, comfort my people,”... Tell them its time to go home again. “Every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill be made low,” as the Lord keeps on making a “way out of no way.”

Over and over again, across all the pages of scripture the same plot unfolds, as God does one little resurrection after another...until on the third day, at the empty tomb, and in the days and nights that followed, the disciples experience the embodied presence of the one to whom the story had been pointing all along—the **Risen Christ, triumphant over death.**

But what does all this mean to us here and now? How may we, too, experience Jesus' living presence among us? How may we come to know and experience for ourselves the gospel of the resurrection?

I am fairly certain that it will not be in the same way that it was experienced by the first disciples. What happened at Easter and in the fifty days following Easter is not something that will be repeated in our experience. He will not again come bodily through

locked doors, inviting us to touch and see his hands and feet. The Easter experiences of the embodied Jesus were given to those who were called to be witness to the resurrection, and they came to an end with the Ascension of Jesus.

And so if it is not in a palpable way that the risen Christ makes himself known to us today, how is it? Luke says that he makes himself known in two simple, ordinary ways—through **word and sacrament**. He comes to us in the ordinary means that he has established, through word and sacrament, through the reading and preaching and study of his word and through the breaking of the bread in Holy Communion.

I like to think that it was almost with a twinkle in his eye that Luke said that immediately after the risen Christ had eaten a piece of fish in their presence, he offered a Bible study. **A Bible study?** At the end of the very day of the resurrection itself? A Bible study? It sounds so mundane, so common place. Something we do all the time. That is exactly Luke's point. He insists that the risen Christ continues to make himself know to us today...through feeding on his word and being fed by his Supper. Jesus says, **“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 and the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.”** Then, Luke says,

“He opened their minds to understand the scripture, 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, 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.’”

“He opened their minds to understand the scripture...” That is what the risen Christ continues to do every time we open the Bible in faith and expectation. Whenever two are three are gathered to search and ponder and struggle to obey his word, he opens their minds to understand the scriptures—all of which point to him as the fulfillment of all that God has been doing from the very beginning of the human drama until its grand finale in the New Creation and the Kingdom of Christ. It is not from a ghost story that we learn that. It is from something as down to earth as the ongoing study of God's word--the living Word of the Living Lord that calls us to be witnesses to his redeeming love in all the world. And empowers us so to be. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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