

Ghost?

Hespeler, 18 April, 2021 © Scott McAndless

Acts 3:12-19, Psalm 4, 1 John 3:1-7, Luke 24:36-48

I was rather struck by the disciples' reaction to the appearance of the risen Jesus in our reading from the Gospel of Luke this morning. It says that, **"They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost."** There is something about that that seems a bit extreme. I mean, I can understand to a certain extent why they might think that they are dealing with a ghost when they see this man who they thought was dead – especially when he appears suddenly among them, maybe even by walking through walls as he does in some of the other passages. That is startling and disconcerting, but I'm not sure if that sense of being terrified might not refer to something else.

I don't know about you, but I've heard a lot of ghost stories over the years and seen lots of movies built around ghosts. And I know that stories and beliefs about ghosts are about as old as civilization itself, probably older. And in all of those stories about ghosts, there is a terror that goes deeper than just being startled by seeing someone who you thought was dead.

What ghosts represent

Now, to be clear here, I don't really believe in ghosts, at least not in the sense that there are actual ectoplasmic beings hanging around in this world who are looking to haunt people or places. But I do think that the *idea* of ghosts in a psychological and social sense is a very real and powerful one. Ghost stories reflect our deep-seated fear of death, of our feelings of guilt or regret around those who have passed on and our anxieties about our own legacies. I mean, think of all the ghost stories you've ever heard, those are the kinds of themes that they always explore. And they are all topics that inspire abject terror in many of us.

So I would suggest that we have developed this whole idea of ghosts in order that we might tell stories about them to help us process these things that disturb us so deeply. So, it is actually very fitting that, when the disciples see the risen Jesus, they immediately jump to the conclusion that they are dealing with a ghost. For they are struggling with all of these terrifying thoughts.

What they were struggling with

First of all, they have just been dealt a very sharp reminder of their own mortality. This man Jesus, their friend, their teacher and the one who seemed more alive than anyone had ever been, has being struck down so quickly while in the prime of life. If that's not a reminder that anyone of them could be cut down so quickly, I don't know what is.

And there is also no question that they were struggling with a lot of guilt and regret around



his death. There are so many references to them deserting him and running away when he was arrested. There is Simon Peter who denied that he even knew Jesus, not just once but three times. They must have felt keenly their own failure to speak up in his defense or to put their lives on the line for him as he was doing for them. They had probably been berating themselves for all of these things. And these are exactly the kinds of feelings that, when we are struggling with them, we will do almost anything to avoid thinking about them and expressing how we really feel. And, like I said, when we are suppressing feelings like that is exactly when we give in to the terrors that, from ancient times, have been associated with ghost stories.

And finally, they were feeling very anxious about their legacy. These were people who had given up everything in order to follow Jesus because they believed in what he said. But now, all of a sudden, the possibilities that he had made them believe in had all been taken away. They had to be asking themselves if they had just wasted the last three years of their lives. They certainly had no idea where they were going to go or what they were going to do from here. Those are also the kinds of difficult struggles that people have always worked through by scaring each other with ghost stories.

Jesus demonstrates he's not a ghost

And so, in many ways, it is not very surprising that their response to seeing Jesus again was not just a startled reaction, but it was a reaction that stirred the deep terror that, from ancient times, people have associated with ghosts. But Jesus wasn't a ghost, that is the whole point of this story we read this morning. Jesus goes on to demonstrate to them in various ways that he is not a ghost. He invites them to touch and feel the substance of him, the reality of his human body. He even asks them to give him some food and I assume it's not because he is particularly hungry but because eating is a perfect demonstration that he is not a ghost, for ghosts need no sustenance. Jesus was not a ghost; Luke does not want us to leave this story without being assured of that simple fact.

Why is that? Is it because Luke does not want us to miss that central piece of Christian doctrine – the insistence that the resurrection of Jesus was a *bodily* resurrection? Well, yes, that is certainly part of it. He wants us to understand that bodies matter and that we need to extend our efforts to save not merely souls but bodies as well in all of our work as Christians. So, there is no question that Luke is underlining an important theological and doctrinal point.

Another reason why it matters

But I think there's another reason why Luke wants to make sure that we understand that Jesus wasn't a ghost. I think that he might have foreseen how some people would come to think of and use the precious story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. You see, there is a long tradition of people using the story of the death of Jesus as a way of piling things like guilt and shame onto people.

At least, I know that I have heard sermons and read books in which people try to make me feel bad because of what Jesus had to suffer. Have you ever heard a message like this? "Do you see Jesus up there on the cross? Have you noticed how he suffers all of the pain that racks his body, the shame that seizes his soul? Well, you did that to him. You, with your selfish act, your lust and

desire, your failure to do everything that I tell you is so important. Every single thing that you have done wrong is like another nail in the hands and the feet of Jesus upon that cross. You should feel awful!”

Making people feel responsible

Have you ever gotten the impression that that was how you were supposed to feel about the death of Jesus? I know I have. It kind of reminds me of that amazing sermon that we read this morning from the Book of Acts in which Peter at first seems to be intent on making everyone in the crowd feel personally responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus. **“The God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus,”** Peter says, **“whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of life!”**

I mean, I have always wondered about that sermon. How are you supposed to persuade people to make a change in their life by *only* telling them that they have done everything wrong? And I sometimes get the impression that that is the only gospel message some people have. All they can do is try and convince people how very bad and evil they are and then shame them by telling them that Jesus had to suffer for all of that. But that, I am sorry, is really not good news and the word gospel is supposed to mean good news.

Peter clarifies

But, of course, that is only one part of the sermon in the Book of Acts. Peter goes on to say, **“And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer.”** He goes on to clarify that the story of Jesus’ death is not about blaming and shaming people into changing their lives; it is about what God has chosen to do for us and certainly not about what we have done to supposedly make God suffer.

But despite that, people have seemed to want to transform the story of Jesus into one that makes people think only of their own failures and their regrets. They have made it into a story that feeds people’s fear of death by making the gospel only about escaping from death and getting into heaven. They have made it into a story that is about manipulating some people’s deepest and most elemental fears that people have and that is what makes me say that I feel like people have turned the story of Jesus into a ghost story because, from ancient times, people have used ghost stories to process some of those deepest fears.

The harm we do with the ghost story

And make no mistake that this use of the story of Jesus’ death has done a lot of harm. I have known and spoken to many Christians who live with a deep fear of hell and death, a deep fear of disappointing their Lord or their church community. And that has led to church leaders of every sort using and abusing the people under their care because once you start motivating people with guilt, shame and fear, it gives you an extraordinary amount of power over them and it is a rare church leader who can resist the lure of misusing that kind of power. Those are the kinds of dangerous

things that are unleashed when we turn the story of Jesus' resurrection appearances into a ghost story.

Not a ghost story!

But it is not a ghost story. As I said, Jesus goes out of his way in this passage to demonstrate just how embodied he is after his death, just as Luke goes out of his way to document it. And I know that a lot of people think that that is about proving that the resurrection of Jesus is real – that somehow the production of the body is what makes it real. But I actually don't think that is the point of it. What makes the resurrection of Jesus real is the difference that it makes in the life of the person who experiences it. And if all the story of Jesus' resurrection does for people is inspire guilt and fear and shame, then, I am sorry, it doesn't matter what bodily proof you have been shown for the resurrection, it seems clear that all you believe in is a terrifying ghost story.

If, on the other hand, what you have experienced of the risen Jesus gives you freedom and grace, if it lifts from you the burdens that you carry on your shoulders – the burdens of regret and guilt and shame, and it sets you free from the need to please others in order to feel acceptable, then you have authentically experienced the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He came back from the dead with a body in order to set your body free from any chains and any bonds. He came back in the body so that you might experience the fullness of resurrected life here and now and have no anxiety about what might happen to you on the other side. He did not return to enslave you under the weight of a terrifying ghost story. When he came back, he was anything but a ghost.