

April 15, 2018 – Luke 24:36-49

“Pastor, do you believe in ghosts?” That was the question I got during lunch with the Ladies Bible Study a few weeks ago. I wasn't surprised they asked me, given the conversation that preceded it. But it still left me a bit speechless.

Because, to be honest... I don't know for sure. I don't know because the Bible doesn't tell me. The issue just doesn't really come up in scripture.

Which honestly makes me think that they don't exist. If they did, we'd hear something about them. The Bible does talk a lot about death and the afterlife. So you'd think they would come up, if they existed. But what we read about death and the afterlife doesn't really leave much room for them.

We don't hear a lot about ghosts in the Bible. But we do actually hear them mentioned today in our Gospel lesson. Maybe you missed it. It was only a passing reference. But it was actually pretty important. Because for one brief moment in our reading today the disciples think that they've seen a ghost.

Let me set the stage for you. The scripture readings in the weeks after Easter bounce around a little bit. Two weeks ago it was Easter morning. Last week it was the week after Easter. And today, we're right back at Easter evening. It's a little confusing, I know.

So it's the evening of Easter. And the disciples have not seen Jesus yet. They've seen an empty tomb. They've seen angels who announced Jesus' resurrection. And they've heard the report of Mary Magdalene, who did see and talk to Jesus for a minute. But Jesus' 11 closest disciples? The men who would soon become apostles? They haven't seen him yet.

Instead, they're gathered together in a locked room. Hiding from the religious authorities, who no doubt want to have them arrested as well. Hiding also, perhaps, from the civil authorities. Pilate put his seal on the tomb, after all. Violating the governor's seal was punishable by death. And they are his top suspects.

So they are hiding in a locked room, scared out of their wits. So scared, it seems, that they can't even really process what's been happening. It's like the exact mirror image of when someone dies. When a person dies, often all you can worry about are the little things related to their death. Phone calls and funeral plans and obituaries and flowers. You almost forget to grieve in those first few days.

Well, the disciples are now experiencing the reverse of that. Jesus has risen from the dead. And they are absolutely frozen by the news. Dumbstruck and bewildered and terrified. Instead of forgetting to grieve, they've forgotten to be happy and hopeful and excited. And it's in this bizarre state of confusion and fear over the greatest, most wonderful thing that has ever happened in the history of the earth that Jesus comes to them.

They're talking amongst themselves over dinner when suddenly he is there. And he says, “Peace to you!” And they say, “AHHH! A ghost!” And I can just imagine Jesus standing there with this exasperated look on his face.

“I told you before I died that I would rise from the dead. The angels told you this morning that I had risen from the dead. Mary told you that she had seen me risen from the dead. The Law and the Prophets and the Psalms all say that I must rise from the dead. Why are you surprised that I rose from the dead? And why in the world would you think that I'm a ghost?”

He doesn't say all that, of course. He simply says, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?” You know, last week we heard about good old doubting Thomas, who wasn't with disciples during this particular event. But Thomas kind of gets a bad rap. Not because he didn't doubt. But because all of the disciples doubted.

None of them expected Jesus to rise from the dead. None of them really believed he had when they saw the empty tomb. It's to every one of them that he says, "See my hands and feet. Touch me, if you have to. I am not vision. I am not ghost. I am not a spirit. I am flesh and blood, resurrected from the dead."

And even that still wasn't enough for them. So he says, "Here give me some food. Ghosts don't eat, right? So if I eat this will you believe then?" In fact, this is one of three different times that we read about Jesus eating after the resurrection. He also eats with the disciples he meets on the road to Emmaus. And he eats with Peter by the Sea of Galilee. Apparently, it's the one thing he can do that always convinces them. Because after he eats, they do finally believe that he is not a ghost.

Now, the question becomes, why does this matter? Why is it so important to Jesus that they believe that he is not just a ghost? I mean, Jesus is not ordinarily one to jump through hoops just because his disciples were too thick-headed to listen the first time. And he is definitely jumping through hoops for them. Look at me. Touch me. Watch me eat a piece of fish. I'm real.

Well, there are a couple reasons here, and Jesus helps spell them out for us. First, there's the prophetic witness of Scripture at stake. Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection were all prophesied about in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms. What we now call the Old Testament.

Which means that the Old Testament is not just some collection of ancient texts that don't matter to us as Christians anymore. All of Scripture points to Christ. All of Scripture testifies to his death and resurrection. And you can read that good news as easily in the books of Genesis, Exodus, Isaiah, and the Psalms as you can in the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. It's all there.

And it's all there for one reason: that we might know the forgiveness of sins when we repent. Boy did the disciples need to hear that. These are a group of men who abandoned their teacher and Lord in his greatest need. Who betrayed him and denied him and failed him in the worst possible way. Their sin put Jesus on the cross. Their sin put him in the grave. Their sin killed him.

But you know what? So does ours. Our sin put Jesus on the cross. Our sin put him in the grave. And our sin killed him. Because Jesus would have died just as readily for any one of us as he would have for those disciples.

And yet, how does it say the disciples reacted to his resurrection? They "disbelieved for joy." I like that expression. It paints a very vivid picture.

It paints a picture of men who had given up on ever seeing their teacher and Lord ever again. Not just because he was dead. But because even if he were to rise from the dead, why would he come back to them? They abandoned him. They betrayed him. They put him on the cross.

They are locked in a room, filled with guilt and shame and hopelessness. And then, suddenly, he is there. Declaring peace to them. Declaring the resurrection to them. And they disbelieve for joy.

They disbelieve for joy that death could not hurt him and the grave could not hold him. That he did indeed rise from the dead. Not as a ghost whose body was destroyed because death was too powerful. But as walking, talking, eating, flesh and blood.

They disbelieve for joy that Jesus' love is so great that he would forgive even those who abandoned and betrayed him. That the Father's grace is so great that he would send his only begotten Son into the world to forgive sinners like you and me. That the Spirit's cleansing is so great that he can wash away all our guilt and shame.

They disbelieve for joy that Jesus is more powerful than your sin. He's more powerful than your doubt. He's more powerful than your guilt. He's more powerful than your death. Because if he can raise himself from the dead, he can raise you too.

And not as some ghost or spirit or undead creature. Not as a zombie eating brains or a vampire drinking blood like we see in science fiction. He will raise you just as he was raised. As living, breathing, men and women of flesh and blood. Who walk and talk and eat broiled fish.

That is what the disciples witnessed on Easter evening. That is what they proclaimed in Jesus' name to all nations, just as he commanded them. And that is what we witness.

It's what we witness when Jesus opens our minds to understand the Scriptures. It's what we witness when we are clothed with power from on high on the day of our Baptism. It's what we witness when we eat of Jesus' very flesh and blood in the Lord's Supper.

They were witnesses to these things. We are witnesses to these things. They proclaimed them to all nations. We proclaim them to all nations.

For we have the promise of our heavenly Father. A promise written in the Law and the Prophets and the Psalms throughout the centuries. A promise that will remain until the end of time. The promise of eternal life with our Lord. Amen.