

“Ghost or Goblin’?”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts

April 18, 2021 – Third Sunday of Easter

Acts 3:12-19; Luke 24:36b-48

A minister offered a children’s sermon on Easter morning. After telling the children about the death of Jesus on the cross on Good Friday and his resurrection on Easter Sunday, the minister asked them a question: “And what do you think Jesus’ first words to his disciples were after he rose again and appeared to them?” One of the children raised her hand. “Yes, Francine?” the minister asked. Young Francine stood up, raised both of her arms into the air and exclaimed, “Ta-da!”

Please pray with me, “O God, take our minds and think through them, take our lips and speak through them, and take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen” (William Sloane Coffin).

I suppose that Jesus could have said, “Ta-da!” to Mary in the garden and to the other disciples when he appeared to them, but that isn’t exactly what is recorded in our four gospels. What is recorded is that Jesus greeted his disciples by saying, “Peace be with you.” Rather than showing off with a proud “ta-da,” emphasizing his own victory over the grave, he humbly offered them a gift of peace, which they desperately needed in the moment.

We can imagine what they would have felt prior to these appearances. Certainly, they would not have been at peace. Rather, they would have felt downtrodden by grief, having just lost their beloved teacher, friend, and companion. They would have been disillusioned and crushed by disappointment, for they had expected that Jesus to usher in the just Realm of God on earth, to be crowned with many crowns, and to reign over all. They would have been afraid of the unruly crowds, which just

days before had cried out for Jesus to be crucified as a criminal and for the murderer Barabbas to be set free, and they would have feared that the leaders of the people were coming to get them next. Perhaps they also felt a terrible sense of guilt for their own failures, as they scattered and fled, rather than remaining by Jesus side in his time of trial. And so they huddled together in a locked room--sad, hurting, and hiding in fear.

The horror story that they were living in became all the more terrifying when, despite being in a closed and locked room, a figure suddenly appeared and stood before them. The only thing that made sense to them was that they were seeing a ghost, some disembodied spirit that appeared only to add to their torment (in their culture, ghosts were always tormentors; there were no Caspers or other friendly ghosts). And yet this figure did not say "boo!" or "ta-da," but said, "Peace be with you." Even with this friendly greeting, they were filled with fright.

And so the resurrected Jesus invited them to see his identifying wounds and to touch his very real body. To prove to them that his body was real and not just a vision, he asked them for food, which he gobbled up in their midst. And as he was a-gobblin', he proved he was no ghost. He was not a disembodied spirit, but had a body, a body that was still-wounded, demonstrating, as Episcopal Priest Barbara Brown Taylor says, that Jesus "had gone through the danger and not around it;" and yet this wounded body was healed. He had a body that was able to take food and consume it, and yet one that could instantly appear in a locked room and then disappear just as quickly. His resurrection body was in some ways the same, and yet it was different, being unbroken, unbound, and uncontained. And his resurrection body provided for the disciples a word of peace, a message of hope, and a calling to share good news with the world.

Just as Jesus came to the disciples in their locked room, when their hearts and minds had been likewise closed tight, Jesus comes to us no matter where we may be, even in our most secret and guarded places, where we hide in fear and doubt and when our hearts and minds are closed. And we have many such locked rooms. We fear many things. We fear a virus and the suffering and death it brings to many. We fear cancer and other illnesses we can't control. We fear the violence we unleash on one another with words and weapons. We fear the many injustices that still plague us as a people as we strive to live into the ideal of being a nation where there is justice for all. We fear the damage we've caused to God's creation and the damage we continue to do. We fear. We hide behind locked doors.

And yet Christ comes to us where we are and as we are, not to haunt us, but to give us peace and to open our hearts and minds even when facing all that does haunt us, so that we can be the still-wounded but living, transformed embodiment of Christ in the world, and as Teresa of Ávila taught us, "Christ has no body now on earth but yours." So be unbroken, be unbound, and be uncontained. Do not cower in fear, fret for your failures, or fixate on how you have been wounded; rather, pay attention to how your wounds are being healed and are transforming you into becoming something new, more beautiful, and better equipped to share God's message of peace and hope with others.

This good day, may God continue to create life anew within you, may God fill us as a community of faith with resurrection life, and may God work through us to transform the world. Amen.