

They thought they saw a ghost. The men among Jesus's friends are still incredulous, even after the women had brought them the good news of the empty tomb. The words of the women, Luke tells us, "seemed to [the disciples] an idle tale, and they did not believe them." But then two of the men had met Jesus walking along the Emmaus road, and Jesus was revealed to them in the breaking of the bread. Still, Jesus' disciples find the whole situation unbelievable. And now, it seems, incredulity gives way to fear, as the eleven and their companions think they are seeing a ghost when Jesus appears among them. "They were startled and terrified," Luke tells us. Jesus offers his gathered followers peace - "Peace be with you," he says - and seeing their fear, he invites them to experience him as an embodied, enfleshed person - to see his hands and feet, to witness his hunger, and to watch him eat broiled fish. Luke tells us that Jesus then opens the minds of his gathered friends to understand the scriptures, that what had been written in the law of Moses, in the prophets, and the priests must be fulfilled, and that the Messiah must suffer and rise from the dead on the third day.

Luke doesn't say *how* the gathered friends felt about seeing the embodied, enfleshed, resurrected Christ after he opens their minds to understand the Scriptures. Presumably, we are to imagine that this group has been persuaded that indeed they had not seen a ghost; that indeed this *was* the resurrected Jesus in the flesh, and now they are ready, inspired and enthusiastic, to go out into the world and witness to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Perhaps they were so persuaded.

But I am intrigued by Luke's narrative detail at the beginning of this passage, that the disciples were "startled and terrified; they thought they were seeing a ghost." That detail sparks my imagination. The passage shows Jesus allaying the fears of his

disciples who are terrified because they think they have seen a ghost, after which Jesus opens their minds to the truth of the resurrection disclosed in scripture. But what if we took an imaginative turn at the beginning of this story. What if the disciples and their friends thought they were seeing a ghost in part because they were seeing what they wanted to see, just as we all at times see what we want to see and believe what we want to believe. Perhaps in that moment, the easiest thing for the disciples to see was a ghost. What if the disciples were startled and terrified not because they thought they were seeing a ghost, but because of the possibility that *they might not be*. Because to believe that Jesus Christ is real, an embodied, enfleshed person, with wounds in his hands and feet, who stands before us hungry, ready to eat a meal of broiled fish - to believe all of that is to accept that the post-resurrection world is radically different than the one we know, or that we allow ourselves to think exists. To believe in a post-resurrection reality is to accept that our lives take the form of the cross, that we are invited to die to ways of being that depend upon and lead to death, and to be born again to life abundant. But that is not a comfortable proposition for those of us whose lives are just fine the way they are right now. The truth of the resurrection surely means that our lives get turned upside down; it surely means that we have to dismantle the death-dealing conditions that make our lives in many ways so comfortable and familiar to us.

I wonder, then, whether some of those friends who were gathered around the resurrected Jesus, even after he had finished his meal of broiled fish and opened the scriptures to them, *still thought* they had seen a ghost, because the alternative - to believe in the resurrected Christ - would be a far riskier and a far scarier proposition. I think our world is populated by ghosts that invite our belief; ghosts that we try to see

because they sustain ways of being that we like, but that ultimately deny the abundant life promised in the resurrection. For example, many of us see the ghost of a once-great America that has deteriorated in the face of multiculturalism and pluralism. Others of us conjure the ghost of an infinitely resourceful planet, an earth that can be exploited without consequence for ever. Some of us are visited by the ghost of redemptive violence, that war-making the world over, and weaponizing everyday interactions at home, will lead to peace and security. We may not believe in ghosts, but we see them everywhere.

Last week, author Isabel Wilkerson joined Wake Forest's Face-to-Face Speaker Forum. She spoke about her most recent book, *Caste*, in which she argues that race in America is best viewed as a caste system, akin to the racial caste systems in India and South Africa. White Americans like to think that our challenges with race have more or less ended; that we now live in a "post-racial society;" that the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow no longer lay claim to our national and social life; and that to the extent that racism is a problem at all, it is because of a few bad apples. Wilkerson shared that one of the most surprising discoveries in her research was that Nazi officials, as they were developing their racist regime in the 1930s, leading to the Final Solution, came to the United States to study the Jim Crow South. The Nazis understood Jim Crow as an example to be emulated and perfected; the only problem they saw with Jim Crow is that it didn't go far enough. Jim Crow, in other words, was for the Nazis a precursor caste system. Ironically, the Nazis saw the reality of systemic racism in American life quite clearly, and yet many White Americans still deny the systemic reach of racism in our

country. Those who most benefit from structural forms of injustice, it is often said, are most challenged to recognize that they even exist.

And so we see ghosts because the alternative is far more terrifying; the alternative requires us to change our lives, even change them radically. Ghosts are supposed to haunt. But I wonder if the realities we don't want to see haunt us more than the ghosts we choose to see. George Floyd and Briana Taylor haunt us. The Atlanta nightclub shootings haunt us. The half million Americans lost to COVID-19 haunt us. Rising sea levels that portend a disastrous environmental future haunt us. Yet despite these hauntings, it is difficult to see that which is right in front of us, embodied, enfleshed, inviting our response - especially if the ghosts we see reflect the realities in which we feel most comfortable.

Jesus reassures his disciples that they have not seen a ghost; he invites them to see his hands and feet, to see him eat and satisfy his hunger. "Peace be with you," Jesus says as he greets his disciples. Could we imaginatively read this passage not only as Jesus comforting his fearful followers, but rather Jesus persuading his followers of what is really real? What is really real is *not only* an embodied, enfleshed wounded, and hungry Christ instead of a ghost. What is really real is not only the fulfillment of the scriptures, of the law of Moses, of the prophets and the priests, and a Messiah who suffers and rises again after three days. What is really real is not only forgiveness and the repentance of sins proclaimed to all nations. What is really real, ultimately, is peace that the resurrected Christ proclaims when he meets us. Not just peace as the absence of conflict, but peace as a condition of wholeness, flourishing, restoration, of *shalom*. Peace of this kind is more real than the things we think we need to feel secure:

violence, exploitation, racial prejudice, and ecological devastation. The peace that Jesus offers is more real than any of the ghosts that we would like to see but that aren't really there. It is indeed a peace that invites us to die to the illusion of the ghosts that inhabit our lives - a death that is uncomfortable to be sure - and to live into the shalom that God extends to us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. What would it be like to live our lives as though peace were the most real condition of our existence, rather than the many ghosts we'd like to think surround us and sustain us?

Really, this text is a kind of commissioning, a sending forth, for the disciples and for us. In Matthew, that commissioning is to the work of making disciples of all nations. In Luke, we are sent out as witnesses - witnesses God's forgiveness and God's shalom. To be sent out - what a strange notion! We who have not been out much, or not at all, in more than a year, are now being sent out to do the work of the gospel. We are commissioned every year in the Easter season, but this is the first time for any of us when we have not actually been out already. I don't know if you have noticed it - but I feel almost as though I've forgotten how to be in the physical company of others. Just last night I had an outdoor dinner with my friend Chris, and as we have both been vaccinated fully, we decided, after some awkward deliberation, that we could finally hug each other in greeting. It was really a weird moment - having to think through whether or not it is safe to hug a friend. We both felt insecure being in the embodied presence of one another - just as, I imagine, the disciples felt insecure being in the embodied presence of Jesus. So - now we are being sent out after a year of staying in. This is an opportunity to be present in a new way as we are sent out - in a way that reflects our confidence in God's desire for all of creation to flourish, to witness to the shalom of God.

As we re-learn what it means to be out, may we do so in the way of the resurrected Christ.

Peace be with all of you! In this resurrection moment, as we finally prepare to go out into the world again, may we be faithful and creative witnesses to the shalom of God. And may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, this day and for the week to come.