

Luke 24:36-48 (NRSV)

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, "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." And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.

Then he said to them, "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, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, 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 of these things.

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

For me, the high point of this Gospel reading comes when Jesus asks, "Have you anything here to eat?" So they give him a piece of broiled fish and he takes it and eats it in their presence. The disciples are startled and terrified and think they are seeing a ghost. They are joyful and disbelieving and still wondering. But when he takes a fish and eats it, something changes.

This story comes right after the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Remember the two disciples, Cleopas and his companion, didn't recognize Jesus on the road until he broke bread with them. Here, for whatever reason, they recognize him right

away, but, in spite of what Cleopas has just been talking about, they think he is a ghost.

Now, this is strange but I sort of understand it. A ghost, you see, still honors the boundaries between the living and the dead. In fact, a ghost *reinforces* that boundary. There are people who are alive, and there are people who are dead. The dead, if they come back, don't come back alive – they come back as wispy, protoplasmic things, mists. People can understand ghosts. Don't you think it is strange that after 2,000 years, this passage translates so well? The ancient Greeks understood ghosts. Ghosts are spirits, ghosts are immaterial, non-corporeal. Jesus even knows the rules about ghosts – “Ghosts don't have flesh and bones,” he says. Ghosts are, well, *ghosts!*

Have you noticed how insistent the Gospels are that Jesus' resurrection appearances are physical and not simply ghost stories? In John's Gospel, Jesus appears to the disciples and he is solid and stable and completely *there*. And in his reappearance to Thomas, he invites Thomas to feel his wounded hands and feet, touch his wounded side. John's Gospel ends not with the Last Supper but rather the First Breakfast as the risen Jesus cooks fish for the disciples on the beach. As that breakfast begins, Jesus is disguised but solid, undeniably present, no spirit, no ghost, nothing like it. Even in Matthew, the women meet him and grab his feet – the text makes a point of it. The women grab his feet. He's solid and he's all present.

Here in Luke's Gospel, he eats with Cleopas and his companion and now he eats with the disciples. If he's a ghost, he's a good eater. No, he's clearly not a ghost. Even Paul tells us in Corinthians, “if Christ has not been raised from the dead, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain.”

Now, again, why would the Gospel writers be so insistent that the resurrection appearances of Jesus be appearances of a physical

body and not appearances of a ghost? Probably there are several good reasons – one of them we’ve already hinted at.

If Jesus were simply a ghost, then the resurrection is nothing all that special. If Jesus returns as a spirit, then the power of God is limited by the categories of “life” and “death.” A ghost is the trace of a dead person, immaterial, misty, unreal, unusual but not unheard of. The resurrection would simply be another ghost story and these are entertaining and scary, but not particularly transformative or world-changing.

But God is beyond categories of “Living” and “Dead” – in fact, God created these categories. That’s what Jesus is gently telling them. Yes, I did die, you saw it, it was real, it was painful, it was awful. And yes, I am alive, I can touch and be touched. I have flesh and bones. There is another way, outside the categories that you know.

You get the feeling that a lot of spiritual people don’t have much use for bodies. You get the feeling that some spiritual people think that what’s important is the soul and that the soul is very much like a ghost, immaterial, misty, unreal. Forget the body, they say, what is important is the soul. The body is corrupt, the body is prone to sin and error but the soul is perfect, the soul is incorruptible.

Well, this view may be right, but it is certainly not biblical. God loves bodies – that seems to me to be the main message that the Gospel writers are trying to get across. Jesus does not return as a disembodied soul – he returns as a body, a real body, and solid person a real good eater, a body very much like our own. Oh, there’s still mystery – sometimes he’s recognizable, sometimes not and the Gospels don’t go into any great detail how God did it, but the Gospels go out of their way to say that this resurrection is bodily and physical. God loves bodies so much that the first thing he does after Jesus dies is to give him a body.

John Updike writes in his poem, “Seven stanzas at Easter”

Make no mistake: if He rose at all
it was as His body;
if the cells' dissolution did not reverse, the molecules
[not] reknit, the amino acids [not] rekindle,
the Church will fall.

How did the cells' dissolution reverse? How did the molecules reknit? We don't know. But if we believe the Gospels' accounts, we know that they did.

Here's what seems to me to be important – if Jesus were resurrected as a spirit, it would be saying implicitly that this world, this physical world in which people walk around in actual bodies that are prone to sin and error and bad behavior, that this world can't be saved, can't be transformed, can't become the kingdom of God. But Jesus coming back as a physical person tells us that God intends to save, to transform *this* world. God intends to save and transform this world full of sickness and disease, of old age and creaky joints, of lust and envy, all these things that we know flesh is the home for. Saving a world of disembodied spirits, it seems to me, would be easy, would be a snap. Spirits don't get sick, they probably don't have greed and envy and the other seven deadly sins. They don't lose their tempers and say things they shouldn't, they don't love badly, they probably don't love at all. Saving that world would be easy, but it would be some other world, not this one.

We live in a world in which bodies create some of the biggest problems but also some of the greatest joys. To touch, to kiss, to hug, to shake hands, to make a meal for someone you love, to walk or run, to do an honest day's work, these are joys beyond measure. To sit out back with a glass of wine and talk with friends. To hold a baby. To watch a play. To *do* a play. To hit a line drive. To sing. These are the things, I think, that make God smile. These are the joys of an embodied world.

We make a mistake, I think, when we fixate on heaven as a spiritual paradise full of disembodied souls. In the epistle reading, John tells us we are God's children now, right now, just as we are. What we will be has not yet been revealed.

We don't know what heaven will be like – Marcus Borg says that we know about as much about life after death as a nearly-born baby knows about the world she's about to enter. But my bet, just from what I know about God's love for the physical world he created, is that heaven will have meals, heaven will have feasts, there will be broiled fish and people with bodies to eat them.

Amen.