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## *Ghosts and Bodies: Spiritual and Religious*

**A sermon by Dean Sam Candler**

**Easter 3 – Year B**

*“While they were talking ... 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.” Luke 24:36-37*

I know it was along time ago; but, do you remember Halloween? It was last October. A long time ago. Some of you were children way back then!

It was years ago, actually. Yes, some of you were definitely children back in those days. When you were a child, maybe you didn't know exactly what the festivity was all about; but you did get the sense that you were supposed to be scared. You were supposed to be scared, and you were supposed to scare people. So you carved pumpkins to look like skulls. You dressed with the black capes and brooms of witches. You disfigured yourselves with fake blood and gore. And some of you were ghosts; you dressed up in sheets and gauze.

Some of us did not like to be scared. So we decided to be goofy and funny instead. For instance, we wore the lampooning masks of famous politicians. I will never forget the first time I saw a Richard Nixon mask on Halloween. In fact, that mask was not funny at all; it was the scariest costume of the night.

The idea was to be scary. I guess ghosts were the easiest images to imitate. But, why are ghosts supposed to be scary? Somewhere along the way, we got the impression that ghosts are scary. I wonder why that is?

In our gospel passage today, from Luke, the disciples are terrified when they see Jesus standing among them. We just heard that they think they are seeing a ghost.

But the word used there in Luke 24 is not actually “ghost” That word is “pneuma,” the same word we might otherwise translate as “spirit.” It's the very same word. The story could just as easily have said, they thought they were seeing a “spirit.”

Back in the old days, in church, we used to say, “I believe in the Holy Ghost,” instead of “I believe in the Holy Spirit.” But the word for both “ghost” and “Spirit” is really the same word. The word is “pneuma.” Yes, it means “spirit,” and it also means “wind.” It means “breath.” It can be all those things.

These days, we give the words “ghost” and “spirit” two contrasting meanings. The word “ghost” seems eerie and scary. The word “spirit” seems wonderful and life-giving.

When the disciples saw the risen Christ, they saw a spirit – a spirit which had some sense of reality, but which did not have a sense of body. And that was scary, like a ghost. It is only when Jesus asks for something to eat, confirming the sense of body, that things begin to calm down.

That! That asking for something to eat changed everything. Something changes at that point, when they eat together.

In fact, eating together can be scary, too; because eating together involves change and growth. Change, and growth, can be

scary. We Christians say we love Easter! We love the new life of Easter! Flowers and warm weather and birds singing. We say we love the changing of the seasons; we love change!

But that is not exactly right. The truth is that change scares us. Have you ever considered who the people are who say they like change? It's only the people who are causing change who say they like it. It is rarely the people to whom change is happening. We usually like change as long as we are the people in charge of it! If we are not in charge of the change, then naturally we resist it!

So, we like Easter as long as we know what is going on and what to expect. Thus, we love the budding trees and change to warm weather. "New life!" we say.

But new life often scares us, too. We got the job we wanted, for instance; but now it looks quite challenging and scary. We wanted a boyfriend or girlfriend, but now that relationship looks serious indeed. We wanted a baby, but now the presence of another life in the house is daunting.

Or consider our desires for companionship. We claim that it sure would be nice to have a meal with family, or with people we love. But most of us find ways to avoid that communal eating. We eat in front of the television so that we don't have to talk to the person next to us. We eat in our cars so that we can be on our way to someplace else. We eat at our desks so that we don't have to encounter others.

The act of eating together can be scary; because the people with whom we eat, are the people who know us the best. The people we eat with know how messy and ungraceful our bodies can be. They know that our tastes are peculiar and fussy. Hey! I know my body is less than perfect; but it's the only one I've got!

When we eat with people, we are formed with them. The act of eating changes us. Quite literally, our flesh is strengthened by that eating. Our bones and muscles absorb protein and energy.

Furthermore, our spirits, too, take on a similar energy. When we tell stories to each other, we are formed by those stories. The words we speak to each other at meals shape our lives. Those stories at the supper table? Those words form us!

That's why, in some monasteries, one of the monks is assigned the task of reading from holy biographies as the rest of the community eats in silence. The bodies of the monks absorb literal food, and the souls of the monks absorb holy stories. Thus, spirits take on flesh.

A spirit without flesh is scary. Jesus was scary until he asked for something to eat. Jesus was scary until he had a meal in his community. In short, a spirit without flesh is scary. It is rambunctious and fleeting. It rambles and wanders. It can't grow. Sometimes in its loneliness, it even does damage.

Hey! As a matter of fact, that's what being "spiritual" and "not religious" is. "I am spiritual, but not religious," some have said. What that sentence really expresses, however, is the desire to have pure spirit without having a body.

Jesus was against that lonely spirit, that lonely ghost, wandering around without body. I believe Jesus was opposed to the notion of spirit without body. Remember: the word for "religion" comes from "re-ligio," which means to tie back together. The word "ligament" comes from the same root. Remember that story on Easter morning about Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones? He saw ligaments and bones and tendons being brought together. He saw religion happening, bodies being tied together. He saw spirit taking on flesh. He saw ghosts taking on bodies.

The purpose of "spirit," the purpose of "spirituality" is to tie bones and muscles and ligaments together. To grow! "RE-ligio!" Religion! The purpose of spirituality is to be religious.

The phrase "I am spiritual, but not religious," then, is the phrase of someone not yet formed, not put together yet, maybe not yet mature. Maybe like someone dressed up as a ghost on Halloween.

Jesus, however, will not be known as a free spirit, a lonely ghost. The gospels, all four of them, are quite clear that Jesus is known in the breaking of bread. Jesus is known in the act of eating. Jesus is known as bodies take on form and shape and energy and purpose.

Jesus met his disciples on the road to Emmaus, in the garden, along the seashore, catching fish. And in each story, Jesus takes on flesh. Jesus becomes a body.

It is not a simple physical body that God resurrects in Jesus. And it is not a simple spirit that God resurrects in Jesus. It is something called “a spiritual body.” It is new. It is not dead religion alone. And it is not empty spirituality alone. It is both. It is spiritual and religious. Jesus is spiritual and religious. He is spirit, and he eats bread and fish.

The reason Jesus was resurrected was so that his body could eat, so that his body could grow. The reason Jesus was resurrected was so that the Body of Christ could form and grow and give life to the world.

Hey! That’s us! The Body of Christ! Yes, we are messy and broken, and awkward and fussy. Hey! I know it’s less than perfect; but it’s the only body I’ve got! So we continue to eat together. We continue to be formed into the Body of Christ. We continue to remember Jesus Christ, in the breaking of the bread.

AMEN.

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