***GHOST STORIES***

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Texts: Luke 24:36-48 and Psalm 27:1, 13-14

Barbara Brown Taylor tells of conducting a worship service in a nursing home with residents who were seriously ill. Some suffered from dementia, some slept through the service, some were confused, some did or said strange things – kind of like a typical Sunday morning here! One Monday afternoon when Barbara was leading the worship service, a confused woman began singing, ‘Row, row, row your boat!’ It distracted everyone. In an effort to gain their attention and regain some control, Barbara clapped her hands and said, ‘What story from the Bible shall I read to you this afternoon? What part of the Bible would you like to hear?’ Things were quiet for a moment. Then an old woman’s broken voice broke the silence, ‘Tell us a resurrection story.’ A moment of silence followed. Then another resident said, ‘Yes, tell us a resurrection story.’ And then another, ‘Tell us a resurrection story.’ And before long, almost all of them were saying, ‘Tell us a resurrection story.’[[1]](#endnote-1)

It is not only the seriously ill in nursing homes who long for a resurrection story. Most of us long for such a story that offers the promise of life in the face of death and hope in the midst of hopelessness. A resurrection story offers a hopeful alternative to the death stories that dominate the headlines these days: another mass shooting in Indianapolis, surges in the coronavirus, Russian troops massing at the Ukraine border, another young Black man shot by a police officer in Minnesota. Tell us a resurrection story that gives us hope amid these stories! A host of movies have told such stories through figures like Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings*, Neo in the *Matrix*, and Yoda and Obi Wan Kenobi in the original *Star Wars* trilogy, though most of those figures are more living spirits than resurrected bodies. John Snow in *Game of Thrones* is a resuscitation, not a resurrection, as he will die again, like Lazarus. Those stories exist only in fiction. For us as Christians there is only one true resurrection story, one real resurrection story: the story of Jesus’ resurrection.

Yet a resurrection story was not on the minds of the disciples gathered on that first Easter evening in a house behind locked doors. For them, the stories of that day seemed more likely to be ghost stories. When the risen Jesus suddenly appeared to them in that house, they didn’t think resurrection; they thought ghost, and you could hardly blame them for coming to that conclusion. Jesus hadn’t opened the locked door and walked in. He had not climbed in through a window. He had not parachuted onto the roof and walked down the stairs. He just appeared! This figure who resembled the crucified Jesus had somehow suddenly popped into their midst saying, “Peace be with you!”, and aside from being transported into the room from the starship Enterprise, ghost seemed the most likely explanation. Not that any of them had ever seen a ghost, but they knew of reported sightings of ghosts – including one from their own Scriptures in the summoning of the dead prophet Samuel by the witch of Endor. The disciples didn’t know any resurrection stories, but they had heard ghost stories that seemed to describe what they were experiencing – the likeness of someone who they knew to be dead passing through solid walls, appearing to them, speaking to them!

They all knew Jesus was dead – of that they were sure, for they had been there at the foot of the cross, or at least within a stone’s throw of it, to see him suffer and die. Some had watched them take his body down from the cross; some had seen the tomb where they laid his body to rest that awful Good Friday. So they were absolutely sure he was dead, until the women and disciples came back from the tomb reporting that the tomb was empty except for a couple of angels; some even claimed to have seen Jesus and spoken to him that morning. Those stories sowed a few seeds of doubt, but they were still *pretty* *sure* that he was dead. Then two disciples came bursting in to say they had walked with Jesus on the Emmaus Road that very afternoon and had broken bread with him at their table before he disappeared. And it was while they were mulling over what *that* report was all about that they saw the ghost of Jesus and heard him say, “Peace be with you!”

The text is full of words to describe their reaction – startled, terrified, frightened, doubting, disbelieving, wondering – exactly the responses you might expect from someone seeing a ghost, exactly the response we might have to seeing a dead friend suddenly standing beside us and saying something ordinary, like “Peace be with you!” What is surprising is that the risen Jesus is surprised at their reaction. “*Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?*” he asks. Did he really expect that they would not be scared silly by his appearance from the dead? Did he really expect that upon seeing him all their doubts would be washed away in one tidal wave of relief? Did he really expect they would welcome him with open arms? What did he expect of them that evening?

Prior to his crucifixion Jesus told the disciples that he would rise again on the third day. Repeatedly he told them of the torturous path that lay ahead of him that would end with his triumphant resurrection. Yet the disciples did not believe it or understand it or recall it. And I doubt that we would have been any different. Death seems to be the logical end, in human experience, and so when Jesus died on the cross their hopes and dreams died with him; when he was buried their faith in him as the messiah was buried too. Perhaps Jesus expected them to recall what he had said, to believe what he had said, to understand that his appearance among them was the very outcome he had described. Or perhaps he expected that upon seeing and hearing him they would recognize and embrace him with joy as Mary had done. Perhaps. But then again, perhaps Jesus was just trying to ease their doubts and fears by suggesting there was no reason to doubt, no reason to be afraid even though his presence there defied reason, for he was the same Jesus they had known, not a ghost but the whole resurrected person. As scholar N. T. Wright notes:

*Resurrection in the first century meant people who were physically thoroughly dead becoming physically thoroughly alive again, not simply surviving or entering a purely spiritual world, whatever that might be.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

Perhaps Jesus expected his appearance to evoke in them more than the thought of another ghost story; perhaps he hoped it would evoke joy at his resurrection!

To prove his point, Jesus showed them his hands and feet, invited them to touch his hands and feet and so erase all doubts that he was a disembodied spirit. He had substance, flesh and bone they could feel with their own hands! He went a step further and asked for something to eat and then ate a piece of broiled fish that they gave him – something no ghost would be able to do – in order to prove that he was no figment of their imaginations, no ghost from the dead, but the risen Jesus who they knew and loved and in whom they might hope once again!

This continuing encounter with Jesus evoked in the disciples mixed emotions that may reflect some of our mixed emotions in these resurrection stories as well. “*In their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering*,” writes Luke. Joy was their visceral response – joy, the first hint that they perceived that this just might be the Jesus they had known. But the joy was tempered with wonder, awe, and doubt about how this could possibly be. And is that not our response to the good news of resurrection? Even if we believe, even when we sing our alleluias, even when we joyfully proclaim, “He is risen! He is risen indeed!” we still struggle to grasp just what that means for him and for us and for our loved ones; we struggle to understand resurrection in a world where everything else that is dead and gone, pretty much stays dead and gone.

We don’t understand the physics or biology or anatomy or chemistry or physiology or even grammar of resurrection. Science and other academic disciplines just can’t help us much on that count, except perhaps for art and music that offer some helpful understandings. Perhaps that is why there is no biblical description of the resurrection, just witnesses to the risen Lord. It becomes then a matter of faith – faith grounded in the promises of God, faith grounded in the testimony of witnesses who had doubts such as we might have, faith grounded in a God for whom all things are possible – all things, including resurrection! What Jesus explained to the disciples, and to us, is that his death and resurrection were a fulfillment of prophecy that had long predated them, that it was all part of the plan of God to bring us back into right relationship with God and to free us from sin and death. Their role, our role, was and is to carry that good news to the world, to all nations, to all people, urging them to repent and reassuring them that in Jesus’ death and resurrection their sins were, are, forgiven.

We are the heirs to that commission, those called to proclaim the good news of Jesus’ resurrection, to urge repentance of sin, and to offer reassurance of God’s forgiveness for us all. As Martin Luther once observed*:*

*Nowhere in the New Testament does Jesus command his disciples to go out into the world and write books, not even the Gospels and the other books of the New Testament. Rather, as the New Testament itself is at pains to attest, “He said to them: ‘Go to every part of the world, and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.’”[[3]](#endnote-3)*

In other words, tell the world a resurrection story, not a ghost story, not a tall tale, but a resurrection story that is full of hope, full of life, full of faith, full of forgiveness, full of joy because it is full of the risen Jesus. Tell that story, my friends. Tell that story! Amen

1. Martin Thielen, *The Answer to Bad Religion Is Not No Religion*, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2014, pp.108-109 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. N.T. Wright, *Surprised By Scripture*, HarperOne:2014, p.44 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Whose Bible Is It?*, Viking: New York, 2005, p.21 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)