

“Ghost Stories!”

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Text: 1 Corinthians 15: 42 - 57, John 20: 11 – 23

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As we read the Gospels it is pretty clear that the early Christians were convinced that Jesus' rising from the grave was a bodily, physical resurrection. He had been alive. He died. He was alive again. That sequence was an intentional, necessary act to demonstrate a vindication for God: that Jesus' resurrection—in part—was to be the proof that his message was indeed God-given. AND...that proof of resurrection had to be conveyed to people over time. Thus it was critical for the gospels to capture the evidence those first witnesses of the resurrection had so later generations—non-witnesses— could be influenced by it as well.

So in the gospels we see Jesus presenting evidence that he was physically restored to life. In Luke we hear Jesus inviting his disciples, “touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” Luke goes on in his account: “While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, Jesus said to them, “have you anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence.” Evidence again. The Apostle Paul, writing only about 20 years after the resurrection, also provided his own version of the evidence for Jesus' resurrection. In his first letter to the church in Corinth Paul gave an ordered list of those who saw the resurrected Jesus. The list wraps up with this statement: “Then he appeared to more than 500 brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died” (1 Cor. 15:6). Evidence again. The crucial nature of the physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus was summed up by Paul a little later in that same letter. If Christ was not raised from the dead then the Gospel message is empty (vs. 14), our faith has been in vain (vs. 14), we are misrepresenting God (vs. 15), our sins have not been dealt with (vs. 17), and there is no eternal life (vs. 18). In Paul's mind Christ's bodily resurrection is central to all the core beliefs of our faith. He then made his final assessment: “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied” (vs 19). So, in the minds of the first Christians, providing unequivocal evidence that Jesus really did have a physical, bodily resurrection was crucial to everything.

Given that, the fact that the gospels also include stories that work against this purpose is truly very peculiar. Stories that seem to make Jesus out to be more like a ghost than a resurrected person with a solid body. Our reading from John's Gospel is a perfect example of this. The story opens this way. “When it was evening on that day (that is, Easter Day), the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said ‘Peace be with you’.” (vs 19). Jesus passed into a room that was locked tight. Now people with solid, physical bodies just can't do this. But then the story goes on with Jesus' invitation to doubting Thomas to examine his body—touch it!—and see that Jesus was back, flesh and bone. The first part of this story,

and the second part of this same story, seem to be at odds with each other. But, more importantly, the inclusion of this ghostly behaviour of Jesus would seem to diminish the New Testament need to assure readers that the resurrection was physically real. After all, as Paul reminds us, a lot rides on it.

So what do we make of this tension? I think the first thing that needs to be remembered is that the Gospel writers were actually story collectors and editors. For example, John's Gospel ends with these words: "But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if everyone of them were written down I suppose the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." The opening words of Luke's Gospel says much the same thing. There were many, many stories of Jesus that people remembered, related and passed on. Luke sifted through them, choosing some of them, in order (as Luke says) "to write an orderly account". The fact that they would choose to include these "ghostly" stories of Jesus—even though at first blush they might appear to work against the need to prove a physical resurrection—actually says a lot about how authentic the early Christians believed these stories to be. Believed enough to include them. John's gospel only has that story of Jesus appearing to the apostles in a locked room. Matthew's gospel alone recounts that Jesus appeared suddenly and mysteriously to Mary Magdalene and a friend in the garden. Luke alone tells the story of how on Easter day Jesus joined two of his followers walking along the road to Emmaus, and the followers didn't recognize him at all until later that night when Jesus took bread at supper, blessed it, broke it and shared it with them. Then, in that moment of recognition, we read "and Jesus vanished from their sight." Three of the four gospels contain ghostly stories, but the story in each gospel is unique.

As we might expect, the ghostly stories of Jesus, age after age, indeed has prompted some people to believe either that the resurrection was not a physical one and has prompted others to believe that the resurrection didn't happen at all. And while the gospel writers and Paul do their best to share their evidence for the physical resurrection of Jesus, still that evidence they provide is not much to go on for us today. After all, Easter day was not covered by the CBC. So as we look into the empty tomb from our vantage point in history, peering over the shoulders of Paul and the gospel writers, we are called to weigh that evidence ourselves. Did Jesus really rise from the dead, or not? This is why Christianity is called a faith, for our beliefs are rooted in a trust that this evidence we are provided is indeed true. And if we trust this evidence to be true, then we can trust that all the other promises of Christ are true as well. That's Paul's point in his letter.

But we still need to make sense of this tension between between the ghostly and physical Jesus. My first point was: the inclusion of these stories shows the integrity of the editors who created the gospels. They could have left those stories out and made their case for the resurrection stronger. In integrity, they kept the stories. My second point was: three of the four gospels include a ghostly story. Each story was unique, unrelated to the others. So that suggests the early believers acknowledged this very peculiar aspect of the resurrection.

Paul was the first one (that we know of) that tried to make sense of it for us as Christians. Again, we turn to his first letter to the Corinthian Church. Chapter 15 begins with Christ's resurrection and then moves into a description of our own resurrection. Paul starts his presentation on Jesus' resurrection with the words, "For I hand on to you as of first importance what I first received myself" (vs 3). So what he was sharing was what he had learned. He shared first the stories of Good Friday and Easter, and then he recounted who all saw the resurrected Jesus. But then he hands on a remarkable body of teaching about our own resurrection—what our experience in the life after this life might look like. Where did he get this? It's not at all clear. But my thinking aligns with some scholars who point back to those ghostly stories of Jesus: that his resurrected body gives us a glimpse at our own.

Paul wrote that "not all flesh is alike" (vs. 39), and that "there are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies" (vs. 40). OK, that makes sense: that the body we have in the here-and-now is different from the one we have after we have "shuffled off this mortal coil." Paul used the analogy of a seed planted in the ground. The seed has one kind of body, and that seed as it gives up its original form in order to give life to the future plant, which has a very different form. An apple seed looks very different from an apple tree, but it's still apple. Paul then sets up a series of contrasting descriptions between the kind of body we have now and the kind we will have after death in eternal life. That this body is perishable, but the future body imperishable. That this body is weak but the future body powerful. That this body is mortal, but the future body will be immortal. That this body bears the image of Adam, but the future body will bear the image of Christ. These contrasting descriptions begin to shed a glimmer of light on the mysterious, ghostly behaviour of Jesus after the resurrection. Now Paul also wrote here that our current body is physical, and that our future body will be spiritual. Now this last description has led many people to think that there will be no physicality at all to our resurrected bodies, but I'm not convinced that will be the case. After all: each of these contrasting descriptions all speak of us having a body, and Paul began this entire description with the assertion that "not all flesh is alike"—which suggests that there can be differences in physicality. But that's just speculation. Even so, all together, the picture Paul is painting for us is still vague, and vague it must be. For it is as Paul says in this 1st Corinthian passage: "Listen! I tell you of a mystery!"

Of all the benefits to us of Christ's death and resurrection, I would guess it is the promise of eternal life that is the one most important to most Christians. To think that this physical life we know is not all. To think that the God we see in part now is the God we will know and see and appreciate fully in the here after. To think that the three score and ten years we have here is but like a blink of the eye compared to the eternity we anticipate. To think that the realm of heaven, and the promised new heaven and earth, where God will walk among people, that this will be our home. Where the lion and the lamb shall lay down together in peace. Where "death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away" (Revelation 21.4). Jesus said that we will share in his glory.

This is one of our hopes as people of faith...and it is filled with wonder! And we can hope, because the one who promised this could not be held back by death himself. And he tells us, neither shall we.

What will it really be like? We'll just have to wait and see! But perhaps we've been given a tiny glimpse of our future, in those three ghostly tales of Jesus. That in his own resurrection Jesus had a form that was physical, and yet not. Perhaps with those attributes Paul described in 1st Corinthians: imperishable, powerful, immortal, spiritual, bearing the image of Christ.

It's intriguing, isn't it? These are wonder full thoughts. These are, as Paul said, "a mystery." But if one who claimed to be the Son of God can rise from the grave after being dead three days, well.....how can we not wonder about the wonders?