

Life AND Giving

Sermon, April 18, 2021

Text: Luke 24:32-48

Thursday was April 15. Some of us may be more aware of this notorious date than others, especially those of us who are required to pay/withhold our own taxes. I'm one of those who wait until the last legal moment to file my taxes ... and it's not due (*only*) to procrastination, it is partly a matter of principle. I want to hold onto my money as long as possible (*and thus allow it to gain interest*) before handing it over to the I.R.S. I was delighted to learn Thursday morning the deadline in 2021 has been extended to May 17, which gave me an unexpected window of relief as well as time to better prepare the house for my two out-of-state children who were coming in to visit that afternoon!

Just about everyone is familiar with Benjamin Franklin's oft-quoted maxim from a 1789 letter to Jean-Baptiste Leroy: "*Our new constitution is now established, and has an appearance that promises permanency, but in this world nothing can be said to be certain but death and taxes.*" I've mentioned before I like how one cynic put it, "*Death and taxes may always be with us, but at least death doesn't get any worse every time Congress meets!*" In today's reading, the disciples might respond, "*Well, Mr. Franklin, now we can't even be certain about death!*" Because of Jesus' resurrection, death no longer has the final word on Life! Easter emphatically claims death is not the final curtain. The title is a bit of a play on Death and Taxes, in terms of opposites. A quick look at a thesaurus will give you these antonyms of death: *Life! Being! Animation! Birth! Consciousness! Existence!* Antonyms for tax: *Give! Relief! Aid! Benefit! Blessing! Unburden! Energize! Invigorate! Inspire!* (synonyms for Tax include the words: *Burden. Encumber. Wear. Tire. Oppress. Strain. Drain. Weary. Demand. Load. Task.*)

The Christian faith is largely and primarily about the antonyms! It is about LIFE and GIVING, not Death and Taxes. In today's reading, Jesus makes clear to the disciples He is alive ... He is not dead, He is not a ghost; He is the opposite of a ghost ... He is a living, animated being. And here He recruits as witnesses other living beings. He wants them to move out and use their lives to tell and demonstrate to everyone who will listen about what makes for real life, *not* to go out there and tax others with additional burdens. That's what this *back-to-life* Jesus wants: living witnesses. Not airy spirits or pious ghosts haunting a pew somewhere, and/or who enjoy scaring people from time to time, but living, breathing, active, loving bodies that witness to life, working to bring life and hope and mercy and relief and aid and benefit and blessing to all about us. (*There's a sermon in itself here, but Jesus wants living bodies like His own, who, if they take this call t seriously, will eventually have some real wounds to show ... but it'll be worth it.*)

In today's reading we are where we were last week when we looked at John's gospel, in that locked room on Easter Sunday night; today's account is the more detailed story from Luke's perspective. It has been two days since Jesus was crucified, and the Eleven (*except, as John notes, for Thomas, who apparently had either stepped out for a time or missed the gathering altogether*) were gathered together along with some others who had known Jesus well. When they got together, what they probably did was just talk, which is what people normally do when they are trying to make sense of a great loss. As John intimates, I'm sure there's also a permeating fear in the room ... fear of their own people; fear of "*Can this happen to us?*", fear of "*Who can we trust?*", etc. Eventually someone broiled up some fish, because eating is always a part of these gatherings. You eat, you talk, you settle into your grief, you quietly face your fears, you eat some more ... not unlike one of the collations so elegantly hosted by our Presbyterian Women downstairs (*in pre-pandemic times*) following a funeral (*just an aside, but those gatherings are so appreciated by the loved ones! Thank you to all who make them run so well*). If you have lost someone you love, you know this scene all too well. People come together, you speak in quiet tones, you talk about the deceased, you relate fond memories, you tell stories. You try to remember better days, and many are still fighting tears. Some wonder how they will carry on without this person who was so much a part of your life ... and some may be quietly worried they may be next. And of course, there is always someone in the room trying to get you to eat.

Well, the conversation that evening of the first Sunday of Easter certainly wasn't like that of a typical Fellowship Hall collation ... partially because of this element of fear was heightened (*should we even BE together? Is it safe? Does anybody know we're here? Who can we trust?*) but also because earlier that morning some of the women in their group had gone to Jesus' tomb and found it *empty*. The song tells us Mary Magdalene had gone to the garden alone, while the dew was still on the roses, but as the other Gospels tell us, other women had been there, too. These women told this story about angels telling them Jesus wasn't there because He had risen from the dead; Mary talked of having actually embraced Him. But some of the men may have been skeptical. Perhaps they're thinking to themselves, "*Hysterical women.*" To them, the empty tomb speaks of grave robbers, further desecration to their Lord's body, and they're probably thinking, "*Oh, when will they just leave Him alone?*" I'm sure the cynics in the room

are thinking grief can do tricky things; you can hear voices and feel presences and “see” people who just aren’t there. *“Come on folks. Get over it. He’s gone. I know it hurts, but we must deal with it and move on.”*

And then ... one of the **men**, Peter, one of “The Eleven” (*as the disciples were known after Juda’s betrayal and death*), one who perhaps knew Jesus better than all the others, he comes with a report that **he** saw the risen Lord. And after hearing from Peter, then these two others come in with their report that Jesus had appeared to them on their way to Emmaus; so they are all abuzz in that room when suddenly, everybody noticed Jesus standing right there in their midst! I imagine everyone just stopped talking. Jesus sees them all staring at Him and He says, *“Peace be with you.”* The text says, *“They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost.”* Peace was about the last thing that was with them at this point! I think Jesus then displays some of His slightly offbeat humor: *“Why are you troubled?”* Well, why do you think?! They had all seen Him killed! Try to imagine you’re in a collation down in Fellowship Hall, and suddenly the deceased whose memory you just honored appears right there in your midst and says, *“Peace be with you!”*... and then asks for a seafood salad sandwich and a cup of tea! You’d be troubled, too!

Jesus goes on to ask them a question He had asked them often in the past three years, and a question he would ask Thomas later: *“Why do doubts rise in your minds?”* Sometimes we do have difficulty seeing and believing what is plainly right there in front of us. What is true, what is real, what is good, what is right can be staring us **right in the face**, and we continue to profess our doubts about it. We don’t necessarily believe what we see; we tend to see what we believe. They are looking right at the risen Jesus, but still they had their doubts. So Jesus says, *“Look at My hands and My feet. It’s me! It really is! Touch Me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones.”* As they all begin to grasp it really is a living Jesus standing with them, we are told they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement. And that makes sense; sometimes the stumbling block to belief is we don’t trust something that’s just too good to be true! *“While they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling, He asked, ‘Have you anything here to eat?’ ”* And someone from the Collation Committee said, *“Somebody get the man a seafood salad sandwich!”*

Actually, they gave Him some broiled fish. I can see them handing Jesus the piece of fish and staring, watching His every move as He takes it, puts it in His mouth, chews, swallows ... and it stays inside Him! He’s real! Jesus, who on Good Friday was completely dead, is now so completely alive He is eating some fish right there in the room with them. HE IS RISEN INDEED! There was some talk in the early centuries of the church that maybe Jesus was some sort of a ghost when He came back, a spirit, an apparition, or even a mass hallucination of profoundly grief-stricken followers. But this was *not* a ghost. He is not a shadow of His former self; He *is* His former self! This is not a meta-physical encounter; this is a *physical* encounter. This is not a hallucination, but living flesh and bone, the opposite of a ghost. He is a substantial, tangible, animated, living, fish-eating person!

In folklore, ghosts are believed to be the disembodied spirits who have “unfinished business;” such ghosts are unable to leave this world until they have completed their unfinished business and can be “at peace” and then they move on. Well, Jesus is no ghost, but He most certainly *does* have unfinished business with the world ... and He is here with the disciples making His unfinished business *their* business. Note that this passage is at the end of Luke’s Gospel, it is also the prelude to Luke’s second volume, *The Acts of the Apostles*, which tells how the disciples do go out on Jesus’ behalf, making Jesus’ business their business: witnessing, preaching, teaching, healing, and otherwise being Christ’s living hands, feet, and voice in their world ... the living Body of Christ.

And we are likewise called to be that body, the living body, of Christ. We are *not* called to ghost-hood. A ghost is just a shadow, a vision without substance, a passing apparition. A ghost can’t really do much practical good, except perhaps hauntingly remind people of the life it used to have once upon a time and perhaps give a good scare once in a while. But we are called to be a living body, not a ghost. People who encounter the living church should encounter this Body the same way the disciples encountered Jesus ... as a living, breathing, vital and engaged entity! A living Body vividly proclaims the life it **has** in all it does; it is active, alive, engaging, loving and carrying on its assigned business with love and vigor. It is not about death, it’s about life! It’s **not** about taxes, as in taxing others with burdens of guilt and fear; it is about giving and helping and redeeming and restoring! It is actively engaging, it breathes, it shares its life, it is generous with its resources, it seeks to do good things and to grow and live and thrive and improve and make the most of every opportunity to help others grow and thrive and come to life as well. It upholds, and proclaims, and faithfully lives by values and ideals and morals and principles that are *not* dead, but are timeless, eternal, ever vital, life giving and life enhancing (*in fact, to not uphold and teach and honor those values and principles only serves to burden others, not set them free!*) It seeks to embrace and bolster and encourage those who have fallen or failed and want to reclaim their life for a more hopeful future!

Along with all the disciples in that room and down through the ages, we are called to be a living body, not a ghost, witnessing to the life and reality of a risen Lord to a world so much in need of the vital presence and life-giving grace of a living, breathing, *real* Jesus.