

On the Sundays following Easter, Jesus keeps showing up. The stories can make us wonder how this whole resurrection thing works. We might, without a blink, declare our faith that Jesus was raised from the dead, and shout, “Christ is risen!”; but if he was raised, why is he still around? Why is he keeping up appearances?

Is this Risen Jesus touchable or untouchable? Does he have a real body, or is he an apparition who can walk through locked doors? Can he eat food, or will the food fall right through him to the floor?

Our lesson this morning adds to the accumulated confusion about the Risen Jesus. As we will hear in our Gospel lesson, he is not immediately recognized when he greets the disciples with, “Peace be with you.” Luke tells us Easter morning’s fear and terror are still present. They believe he is a ghost.

Just to be clear, ghosts in the first century were as frightening as those which appear in an old Three Stooges movie. Spirits and ghosts struck fear in people then, as now. Ghosts were not physical – they could not be touched or felt, much less consume food. Yet, Jesus will speak to the disciples in very physical terms:

- Look at my hands and feet – see that it is I myself;
- Touch me and see;
- A ghost does not have flesh and bones.

Finally, Jesus will ask for something to eat. They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and “he took it and ate it in their presence.” Don’t let that pass by your ears too quickly. While other post-resurrection appearances include food, this is the only one in which we are told Jesus himself eats, as if to emphasize to those disciples, “Ghosts don’t eat fish.” Let us listen to how Luke tells the story of Jesus’ appearance in Luke 24:36b-48:

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.

...in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering... The kernel of this sermon was planted several months ago as I heard a radio program about how younger generations had rejected most of the supernatural stories of their faiths, did not participate actively in the life of a faith fellowship, but with the suggestion as well that those who had been raised in the church or temple or mosque missed the fellowship aspect they once experienced. I suppose the lofty goal of this sermon would be to alter that reality, but instead, I would like to address it as best I can as a lifelong church insider, who seeks to sense how the church is perceived by those not involved, and how that affects us as the church, the custodian of the Christian faith experience. In a sense, I began this sermon on Easter Sunday, when generally church attendance doubles, for as I prepare Easter sermons, I consciously keep in mind those who only hear one or two sermons a year.

Who believes this stuff? It was actually in the 19th century when ethical societies began to offer an alternative fellowship for those who questioned the beliefs of those who met in weekly gatherings of church, temple or mosque. Certainly, the decline increased within the last half century, and while we wonder where the millennial generation is, we should not forget most of the boomer generation left the church the day after confirmation class, if they even stayed that long.

These days fewer and fewer people are convinced of the truth of many biblical stories and accounts. Few if any outside the church or other faith traditions believe the universe was created in seven days. Many reject images of a God of vengeance wreaking death on enemies as is told in the Hebrew Scriptures. While the death of Jesus is more easily believed since we find injustice in today's systems and societies, the Easter morning empty tomb, as well as what we call the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, are seen as stories, and many wonder how otherwise reasonable people seem to accept them as truth.

My belief is few folks have problems with Jesus and his teachings and parables, but the stories, the miracles, and later, the church's overlaid theologies of sin, atonement and salvation have pretty much been dismissed as irrelevant if not considered outright unbelievable. The church's own policies and practices of exclusion have not enhanced the invitational nature of faith many find in the life of Christ, whose focus was not on the pure and pious but the lost and least. The term "nones" is now used to describe people who consider themselves spiritual but not religious, offering a kernel of understanding about both the reality of and the possibility for Christianity's future.

What I would like to do is briefly look at a few beliefs of our faith or the church, how each has been portrayed or perceived, and how we might consider them as we move into our faith future. I have arbitrarily chosen four, but there could be hundreds more.

First, heaven and hell. No, I don't have a list to present as to where each of you is going! As I have shared over the past couple weeks, resurrection is not the same as heaven, and Easter faith is not a guarantee of heavenly reward. Yet an image of the church over the centuries has left people to believe that you need to have faith, you need to come to Jesus, to avoid ending up in hell. Yet, there's a problem with hell. While a majority of people may believe in heaven, few these days believe in hell, and those who do are probably a part of a church. If it ever was, the threat of hell is not an issue for the vast majority who question hell's very existence. So, if people sense a primary reason we are here is to avoid eternal punishment, it is really no longer a drawing card, and even when it was, it was based in fear not faith.

I like what I read about Rob Bell's understanding of heaven and hell. He "...stirred up a tidal wave of controversy no so much for suggesting there wasn't a hell, but for suggesting a loving God would ensure that such a place would sit empty." ("Hell and the Love of God," by Christian Piatt in Sojourners magazine, February 2014) I thought, that's a God I want to follow, for it means we regard eternity as a gift, not a reward, and it is a gift to be received and lived now.

Second, the church has an image about sin and salvation. In one way, we have ignored sin, or approached it as a diet food – sin lite – with the acceptance we all do things wrong, but not nearly as wrong as those about whom we hear in the news. Along with "sin lite," we do not name our sin. What if, just as we share joys and concerns openly, instead of a silent time of confession, we instead shouted out our sins. But then, who wants to hear that?

The other side of sin comes from the pulpit pounding reminder of our sinfulness and need of salvation and only Jesus can save us. Such language and judgmentalism is not inviting, though those who advocate such often don't care because they believe it is absolute truth. Jesus died for our sins. What does that mean? It needs to be more than a phrase that easily slips off our tongues. Don't just say it if you can't say what it means.

In terms of sin, I think most people believe life includes darkness. There are dark areas to, dark times in life. We don't say all life is good. We don't dwell on the dark, but we needn't deny it. We don't deny there is evil, though not all believe it is tied up with a God-competing power named Satan. Most also don't deny we are each capable of evil. Some name the evil sin, but even those who don't still recognize darkness as a part of life. They also realize it does not belong there.

What we have in our faith understanding is the belief God does not desire for it to be there either. We believe Jesus experienced that darkness as a human. Christ's life and death connects with us in our darkness so we do not feel alone. And the church, as Christ's re-formed body is called to humbly continue that connection without bias or judgment.

This led me to a third thought about the church, namely our being considered as exclusive even when we say we welcome all. Only recent history has shown the church as excluding membership and leadership by race, class, gender, and sexual identity. We are wise to acknowledge our discomforts with those different than ourselves, and admit our preference to socialize and worship with those who share our beliefs, our values, our politics, our economics. We are also wise to understand how this can inhibit being a vital faith community.

Nadia Bolz-Weber is the pastor of a church named House for All Sinners and Saints. The tattoo on her one arm contains images of the liturgical year of the church, and she is traditionally Lutheran in terms of liturgical practice. Yet, people look to how she has led a church that is truly welcoming of all people and many seek to replicate it. I like how one person suggested other churches try to do so:

“The way to learn from this church is to learn what they worry about and what they don’t. They worry about including others. They want to chew on scripture and gaze on its delights. They want to enjoy one another’s presence, not in programming but in friendship. ... The right way to imitate it is to learn [how to live one’s faith] with integrity. How to do so with humor. How to do so with a theology big enough to allow one to talk about the depths of sin and the heights of glory.” (*Sojourners* magazine, April 2014, p. 38)

Fourth, we can become caught up in creeds and beliefs, theologies and policies, and even insisting on people believing in them. I think we might best begin with the mystery of faith rather than our certainty.

Dorothy Sayers considers the resurrection a mystery and suggests, “Nobody is compelled to believe a single word of this remarkable story.... Now, we may call this story exhilarating or we may call it devastating; we may call it revelation or we may call it rubbish; but if we call it dull, then the words have no meaning at all.... Any journalist hearing of it for the first time, would recognize it as News; those who did hear it for the first time actually called it ... good news at that.” (Sayers, Dorothy, in devotion “The Greatest Drama” found in *Bread and Wine* Plough Publishing: Farmington, PA, 2002, p. 297.)

Our language of creed and worship and song can be inhibitors to faith if we are not careful. On the cover of the bulletin is a variation on the Apostle’s Creed. It does not use the language of “virgin birth” or even “resurrection of the body,” that for many falls into the “Who believes this stuff?” category. Yet, this creed captures incarnation and resurrection in an active life now: *Your fearful suffering brought the new human being born for freedom. You still rise again each time we raise an arm to defend the people from profiteering domination, because you’re alive on the farm, in the factory, and in school. I believe your fight goes on, I believe in your resurrection.*

In today’s lesson, Jesus asks for something to eat, but is doing more than proving he is not a ghost. He is teaching that they, the disciples, the church, the Body of Christ is sent out to feed a wounded, hungry world – people hungering for food and forgiveness, faith and equality, hope and love. Once he moved the disciples past their fear, they were open to his teaching, and could be his witnesses, equipped to deal with other’s fears and the dark parts of life.

To be the real, tangible, visible Body of Christ on earth requires a real and tangible Risen Christ, not a ghost. Wounds do not occur in ghosts, and ghosts don't eat fish. Jesus said my wounds are real, my hunger is real, I am real. He is also saying the wounds and fears of the world are real, and human hunger is real. Go into the real world – the physical, economic, political world of everyday. Go into the real world to be my real, my visible body. Go into the real world to heal and to feed and to forgive. If we do, there is a good chance people might believe this stuff.