

Community Church of Issaquah
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When Jesus Comes to Visit

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Do you believe in ghosts? I mean the kind that looks like a white sheet or something? Is there really such a thing as a haunted house? My neighbor is from Georgia. She and her family travel a couple of times a year all over the US just to visit haunted houses. I asked her once why she did something like that and she said, "Because they're real." I don't really think about that much, even though I have watched a couple of television programs that supposedly tell the story of some of these haunted places. Every time I start to think about it, all I can recall is what I saw on television as a kid, and I begin singing, "Casper, the friendly ghost." Does anyone else remember that besides me?

So, imagine my interest when I was reading the Bible story of Jesus's return from the dead and visited his disciples. In the Scripture today, I smiled when I read, "They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost." It dawned on me that this concept of ghosts or unseen spirits is not new. It isn't something that a television writer thought up to draw viewers or Hollywood invented to sell more theater tickets. But what does all this mean for us today? What does this have to do with our lives here in the twenty-first century? Does Jesus have a message for us? And if he does, what is it?

First, we should examine the circumstances surrounding this surprise visit from someone that these followers believed was dead. Perhaps they had not witnessed the exact crucifixion to see when Jesus, nailed to the cross, took his last breath, but they had heard about it. In their minds, this rabbi, teacher, purported Messiah was dead. The Romans paid the guards at the tomb to lie and say that the body of Christ was stolen so that any belief that he had risen from the dead as he foretold was silenced.

Before appearing to the disciples, Jesus had encountered two men who had left Jerusalem and were going back to their village in Emmaus. Engaging in conversation with them, he asked what they were talking about. "About Jesus of Nazareth," they said and then began to tell them what they had been told about the women at the empty tomb and the disciples who, not believing the women, went to see it for themselves. As Jesus prepared to move on past the encounter, the two invited him to stay with them, which he accepted. Then at the table when Jesus took the bread and gave thanks for it, the two men's eyes were opened and they recognized who he was. But the two men left the table and returned to Jerusalem. There they found the 11 disciples and others and related to them what had happened. Now the story takes another interesting turn.

While the two were telling their exciting experience with seeing Christ, Jesus popped up in the midst of them and he simply said, "Peace be with you." That would be similar to one of us showing up for a family reunion unexpectedly and greeting everyone with, "Hey there, how are you?" It wouldn't be at all unusual for those there to be startled

and surprised. We'd be asking, "Where did you come from?" or "What are you doing here?" But before anyone in the room could say anything, Jesus asked them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds?"

These men who had followed Jesus and his ministry for several years, had to be shown proof that the man standing before them was indeed the risen Christ. When Jesus had reached out his hands and told them to touch him, he added a little comment that makes me smile. "Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see I have." Their initial thought that this was a ghost or a spirit outside the flesh was shot down. Yet, they still did not believe that it was Jesus, not until he asked for food and they gave him fish and watched him eat it. Then he reminded them of what he had taught and what the prophets had foretold about his death and resurrection. At last, they understood and believed.

This segment of the Bible ends when Jesus led the disciples out of the village, lifted his hands to bless them, and was lifted up into heaven. Then what happened? It was when Christ ascended into heaven that Luke says the disciples worshipped him and went back to Jerusalem to speak in the temple. Nice ending to the story, isn't it?

There are lessons for you and me in this section of the Scriptures. Let me share some things I learned as I studied and prepared for today's message. First, like the two men on the road to Emmaus who encountered Jesus, not knowing who he was at first. Even so, they invited him into their home, and as he fed him, Jesus revealed himself

to them. We are not sure, but the two men might have believed that their hopes for a Messiah were over with the death of Christ. Even though they had accepted most of his teachings and tried to follow his example, they failed to remember the core of Jesus's purpose – to offer himself as sacrifice and then be resurrected. And now, here he was, brought back to life and sitting right there with them. In their presence. Right there in front of their eyes. But wait. When does the scripture say their eyes were opened? When Jesus took the bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave it to them.

For me, there seems a strong lesson for us about when we see Christ. Not with our eyes, but with our hearts and with our spirits. Each time we choose to give help to someone, whether donating at a food bank, or giving our time to someone in a crisis, or welcoming a stranger, I believe that is when Jesus comes to visit us in spirit. No, we won't see him in the flesh, at least not his flesh. But we will see the Spirit of Christ in the lives of those we minister to. Like one of the men said to the other after Jesus had disappeared, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scripture to us?" When we as Christians talk to others and share the Scripture, we have an opportunity to see their hearts burning and reflecting the love and grace of Christ.

The second lesson I learned from this account in the final verses of the Gospel of Luke concerns how the disciples thought they had seen a ghost when Christ appeared to them. If Jesus had been their teacher for about three years before his death, and if he surely had brought their

attention to the prophecy concerning his imminent sacrifice and promised resurrection, why were they startled and frightened when he fulfilled that promise?

When he assured them that he was not a ghost, when he showed them his hand and feet that had just days before been nailed to a cross, and when he reminded them of what he had told them, then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. It was a bit of a complicated process to convince them of who he was and what his hopes were for them as his witnesses, but in the end, they worshipped him with great joy.

Now, I've never thought that Jesus was a ghost. I am well aware of how the Scriptures educate us about how Jesus ascended into heaven in his earthly body and how God then gave us his Holy Spirit as our comforter and teacher. That is why we are called a trinitarian faith, believing in God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, all according to the Bible. I would be amiss if I said that I ever had a vision and saw anyone or anything in a spiritual sense. But, like the disciples, the more I learn about Christ and his teachings, the more I experience a feeling that Jesus does come to visit us. Not in the physical way he came to be with the disciples as we read in the Scripture today. But I know that Jesus does come to visit us.

How does Jesus come? Have you ever read a book and come across a line or portion that popped out like it was in neon lights such that it had a profound impact on your life? Have you ever met a person whose influence on you has left a mark that you will take with you all your life?

Have you ever sat in a worship service and felt that the message of that day was directed toward you? Have you ever been in a crisis in your life and had an individual of a group come to your support and offer the care and love you desperately needed to move past that event? I could go on and on with these examples so that you might understand that Jesus does come to visit us.

As a believer in the resurrected Jesus, I want to always have at the door of my heart a sign like we always had at our home as I grew up. What did it say? "Welcome." I want always to have a welcome mat in my life so that at any time Jesus wants to come pay a visit, the door will be open. I want my eyes to stay open so that I can see the spirit of Christ in others and I reach out to them and as they reach out to me. That's when Jesus comes to visit. And trust me on this, he does come to visit you as well. Have you got your welcome mat out and ready to say, "Come on in! You're always welcome." I hope so.