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## *Ghosts and Bodies? Spiritual and Religious?*

**A sermon by Dean Sam Candler**  
**Easter 3 – Year B**

*“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.” Luke 24:36-37*

I know it was a long time ago; but, do you remember Halloween? It was last October. Some of you were children way back then!

Maybe it was years ago. Yes, back in those days, some of you were definitely children. When you were a child, maybe you didn't know exactly what the festivity was all about; but you did get the sense that you were supposed to be scared. So you carved pumpkins to look like skulls. You dressed with the black capes and brooms of witches. You disfigured yourselves with fake blood and gore. And some of you were ghosts; you dressed up in sheets and gauze.

The idea of Halloween costumes was to be scary. I guess ghosts were the easiest images to imitate; so, at our house, there was many an old pillowcase or sheet with holes cut out of it. We would go around saying, “I'm spiritual, but I'm not religious! I'm spiritual, but I'm not religious!”

No, that's not it. I think we were saying, “Boo.”

Still, why are ghosts supposed to be scary? I think it is because, quite simply, ghosts do not have bodies. That is what makes them eerie, somehow not right. They do not have a body. They are not tied up with a body.

In our gospel passage today, from Luke, the disciples are terrified when they see Jesus standing among them. We just heard that they think they are seeing a ghost.

But the word used there in Luke 24 is not actually “ghost” That word is “pneuma,” the same word we might otherwise translate as “spirit.” It's the very same word. The story could just as easily have said, that the disciples thought they were seeing a “spirit.”

Back in the old days, in church, we used to say, “I believe in the Holy Ghost,” instead of “I believe in the Holy Spirit.” But, in the Bible, the word for both “ghost” and “Spirit” is really the same word. The word is “pneuma.” Yes, it means “spirit,” and it also means “wind.” It means “breath.” It can be all those things.

These days, we give the words “ghost” and “spirit” two contrasting meanings. The word “ghost” seems eerie and scary. The word “spirit” seems wonderful and life-giving.

When the disciples saw the risen Christ, they saw a spirit – a spirit which had some sense of reality, but which did not have a sense of a usual body. And I believe it was that, that lack of a body, which was the scary thing, like a ghost. It is only when Jesus asks for something to eat, confirming the sense of body, that things begin to calm down. Apparently, asking for something to eat changed everything. Something changes at that point when they eat together.

Actually, the act of eating together can be scary, too. It can be awkward and complicated. The people with whom we eat see

us in vulnerable and messy ways. Sometimes they are the people who know us best. They know how messy and ungraceful our bodies can be. They know that our tastes are peculiar and fussy. Hey! I know my body is less than perfect; but it's the only one I've got!

Bodies require care and maintenance, too. They stay the same when we want them to change, and they change when we want them to stay the same.

Yes, the people with whom we eat, are the people who know us the best. And when we eat with them, we are formed with them. The act of eating changes us, both physically and spiritually. Quite literally, our flesh is strengthened by that eating. Our bones and muscles absorb protein and energy. We grow.

Furthermore, our spirits, too, take on a similar energy. When we tell stories to each other, we are formed by those stories. The words we speak to each other at meals shape our lives. Those stories at the supper table? Those words form us! We grow.

That's why, in some monasteries, one of the monks is assigned the task of reading from holy biographies as the rest of the community eats in silence. The bodies of the monks absorb literal food, and the souls of the monks absorb holy stories. Thus, spirits take on flesh.

A spirit without flesh is scary. It's not right. Jesus was scary until he asked for something to eat. Jesus was scary until he had a meal in his community. In short, a spirit without a body is scary. It is rambunctious and fleeting. It rambles and wanders. It can't grow. Sometimes in its loneliness, it even does damage.

Hey! As a matter of fact, that's what being "spiritual" and "not religious" is. We have all heard the phrase, "I am spiritual, but I am not religious;" and we have probably said it, at some point or another. What that sentence really expresses, however, is the desire to have pure spirit without having a body.

Jesus was against that lonely spirit, that lonely ghost, wandering around without body. I believe Jesus was opposed to the notion of spirit without body. Remember: the word for "religion" comes from "Re-ligio," which means to tie back together. The word, "ligament" comes from the same root. Remember that story on Easter morning about Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones? He saw ligaments and bones and tendons being brought together. He saw religion happening, bodies being tied together. He saw spirit taking on flesh. He saw ghosts taking on bodies.

The purpose of "spirit," the purpose of "spirituality" is to tie bones and muscles and ligaments together. To grow! "RE-ligio!" Religion! The purpose of spirituality is to be a living body. The purpose of spirituality is to be religious. The idea is to have both a spirit and a body. Like Jesus was. Jesus was both spiritual, AND religious.

The phrase "I am spiritual, but not religious," then, is often the phrase of someone not yet formed, not put together yet, maybe not yet perfected. Maybe like someone dressed up as a ghost on Halloween.

Jesus, however, will not be known as a free spirit, a lonely ghost. The gospels, all four of them, are quite clear that Jesus is known in the breaking of bread. Jesus is known in the act of eating. Jesus is known when bodies take on form and shape and energy and purpose. Those bodies are our own, individual, physical bodies, which need food. And those bodies are also our parishes, our communities! They, too, are bodies, which also need food and resources, care and maintenance.

And so, in his resurrection life, his changed, risen life, Jesus met his disciples in such places as the road to Emmaus, in the garden, along the seashore, catching fish. And in each story, Jesus takes on flesh. Jesus becomes a body.

I realize that it is not a simple physical body that God resurrects in Jesus. And it is not a simple spirit that God resurrects in Jesus. It is something that Saint Paul called (in 1 Corinthians 15) a "spiritual body." It is new. It is not dead religion alone. And it is not empty spirituality alone. It is both. It is spiritual and religious. Jesus is spiritual and religious. He is spirit, and he eats bread and fish.

The reason Jesus was resurrected was so that his body could eat, so that his body could grow. The reason Jesus was resurrected was so that the Body of Christ could form and grow and give life to the world.

Hey! That's us! The Body of Christ! The Church! Yes, we are messy and broken, and awkward and fussy. We require care

and maintenance. Hey! I know it's less than perfect; but it's the only body we've got! So, we continue to eat together. We continue to be formed into the Body of Christ. We continue to re-member Jesus Christ, in the breaking of the bread.

AMEN.

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