
Virtual Meetings and Seances and Ghosts: Spiritual or Religious?

**A sermon by the Very Rev. 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

We’ve all heard our share of pandemic jokes in the past year, but one of my favorites has to do with video conference meetings. Some people call them virtual meetings. Some people call them Zoom meetings.

The joke is about those familiar, awkward, questions and concerns that seem to accompany every Zoom meeting, at least at its beginning. “Are you there? Are you there? ...We can see you but we can’t hear you! Can you hear me? ...Joe? Mary? Are you there?”

The joke is that Zoom meetings are like a modern version of a seance! Remember the old seances? They were eerie and quasi-spiritual: “Are you there? We can hear you, but we can’t see you! Can you hear me?”

What a time this is. Our meetings become like seances, and our images become like ghosts. Fading in and out. Sounding like we are in tunnels and echo chambers. Pixilating like vapors. We are like ghosts! Ghosts without bodies. It’s been eerie and exhausting.

Many of us, it seems to me, have reached still another level of development towards being “spiritual but not religious.” We have become what some of us have said we wanted: to be “spiritual but not religious.” Let me explain.

According to the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus first appeared, his disciples were terrified. Why? Because they thought he might be a ghost!

But the word used there in Luke 24 is not actually “ghost” The 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.

And when we are bodies together, we share things like air and breath. We breathe on each other. We risk infecting each other, even if we also risk being sustained by each other.

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

A spirit without flesh is scary. It's just 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 isolated 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. It can also be the phrase of someone who has been isolated and separated from the body.

This past season of quarantine, and social distance, has put all of us – and especially the Church—into a ghostly state. We've taken a step backwards to the séance age. We see and hear each other, but we cannot touch and breathe with each other. We cannot eat together. We cannot sing together. We are spiritual, but we have no body. We are spiritual, but we have not been able to be religious. We have lost much of our formation together.

Jesus did not want to 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. And Jesus is known when he breathes on people. 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 breath. 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. And Jesus breathes on people.

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. And to give breath – holy, healthy breath—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 the Church – in whatever form it is – is the only body we've got!

So, I look forward to eating and breathing together again. I look forward to being formed as the Body of Christ again. I look forward to getting away from seances and virtual meetings. I need real touching, real breathing, real bodies, real religion.

I look forward to remembering, "re-membering," Jesus Christ, in the breaking of the bread.

AMEN.

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