

Focus: Jesus's resurrection creates forgiveness.

When you hear a ghost story, what does the ghost say when it jumps out? **Boo!**, right? Well, apparently if you talked to Peter and the gang, they thought the ghost would say something even more terrifying... "Peace be with you." Because that's how Jesus, risen from the dead, greets his disciples, and Luke tells us, "They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost."

Why might that be?! What is so terrifying about a ghost...if that ghost is their friend Jesus?

Bishop Craig Satterlee in his weekly video¹ suggests that the disciples are frightened because if Jesus is a ghost, he has come to *haunt* them. The idea of Jesus haunting you like something out of *Poultergeist* might seem funny...to us...two thousand years later. But it didn't to the disciples.

No less a theological authority than the critically acclaimed film from 1995 *Casper* tells us that the reason that ghosts cannot "cross over to the other side" (i.e. die dead once-and-for-all) is because they have "unfinished business."² The movie, which is one of those kids' movies that isn't really just for kids, is about the characters, ghostly and fleshly, finishing the unfinished business in their lives.

Say what you want about fiction or ghost stories or movies that did strange things to me as a kid, but when we think about what haunts *us*, isn't it our *unfinished business*? The opportunity that we let slip away, the goodbye that we didn't get to say, the hurt we've done to each other, not telling someone that we love them while we still can, the painful memory we've avoided talking about or processing. One of the worst things about death is that it forecloses our ability as humans to finish our unfinished business.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, but *Jesus*? Come on. Why would *Jesus* haunt anyone? Well, frankly, there's a lot of unfinished business between him and the disciples. Some of his last words to the group were "All of you will desert me (Mk 14:27)"—and they did. He asked his closest friends James and John and Peter to stay awake and pray with him on the last night of his life—and they fell asleep at the wheel. Peter—well, he must feel the most squeamish of all—you see, he denied knowing Jesus *three* times while Jesus was about to be crucified. Maybe the disciples fear Jesus is going to haunt them by chasing them right out of their locked room! (And...spoiler alert: they wouldn't be wrong.) But I think they are haunted by Jesus's ghostly reminder that the dreams they had on Palm Sunday that are no longer possible, haunted by their lack of courage, haunted most of all by how they deserted their friend in an hour of need and let him die hanging beside two criminals. To the disciples, Jesus is not a "friendly ghost."

But this is the plot twist of the Gospel: *Jesus is not a ghost at all*. He shows them his wounds, he eats a piece of fish in their presence *all to prove that he is **bodily** resurrected*. Ghost or body, you say, what's the big deal? The big deal is that by raising Jesus from the dead, God has done something new. Ghosts the disciples knew about; they were used to hauntings, memories, death.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GHozaKgqpF4>

² [https://casper.fandom.com/wiki/Casper_McFadden_\(Film_Version\)](https://casper.fandom.com/wiki/Casper_McFadden_(Film_Version))

But by raising Jesus from the dead, God has “finished Jesus’s business.” Not only has God defeated all the people that put Jesus to death, but he has erased the score between the disciples and Jesus. Jesus is no longer dead but alive. Jesus is no longer abandoned by the disciples, but he has rejoined them. Jesus is no longer denied but glorified. Jesus can no longer thought to be holding a grudge or haunting anybody, but he is there with what words? “*Peace* be with you”—in a word, **forgiveness**. By overcoming death, resurrection makes forgiveness eternally possible.

Notice: Jesus himself connects resurrection and forgiveness. “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.”

...which brings us to our story from Acts, where Peter is doing just that: preaching about Jesus in Jerusalem to a Jewish crowd.

But this sermon, well, let me tell you, it’s pretty harsh. He would not collect a pension preaching like this to a congregation today. “The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses.” Yikes!

Not only is he harsh, but, hey, wait, wasn’t Peter the guy who just denied Jesus three times? In fact, that word he accuses the Jews of “you *rejected* him”—it’s the same word in Greek that means *deny*—just the thing Peter was busy doing all day Good Friday! Peter and the Jews in Jerusalem are fundamentally guilty of the same sin! And now he’s talking to them like this? Jeez-o-Pete, get off your high horse!

But, you know, maybe Peter isn’t so dense. My hunch is Peter is well aware of his kinship, of his co-guilt with the crowd. In fact, I think that’s why the Holy Spirit sent *Peter* to preach this sermon. Think about it: God could have sent Mary Magdalene who more or less got it right to preach this sermon—or, well, anybody but Peter! But God sent that denier, that sinner *Peter* to preach to this group. Why *Peter*?

Because that’s resurrection. Lutheran theologian Paul Hinlicky is fond of saying that we get evangelism wrong when we make it about selling a product or trying to force someone to believe. He says it’s better to think of evangelism as “one beggar telling another where to find bread.”

Peter has found bread. He has found forgiveness. He has found a new calling. Buried is the ghost of Peter the right-hand man of Jesus the political messiah. Buried also is Peter the denier. Risen and alive, *resurrected* is Peter the forgiven one, Peter *God’s witness*.

In this sermon Peter preaches, he’s not berating them. He’s doing what we talked about last week. He’s naming the sin—and he can do this in a fundamentally authentic way because unlike the worst Christian evangelists who preach to “those people” thinking that they’re better than

everyone else—Peter preaches as a fellow sinner who has found forgiveness, as a fellow beggar who has found bread, as a fellow haunted one who’s heard something better than a ghost story. “And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out.”

“You acted in ignorance.” And if *those* aren’t words for our world today, for our own lives, I don’t know what are. But the Good News is, like Peter, we don’t have to wallow in the ghost stories of our own actions or inactions.

Jesus is risen, and we are witnesses. Jesus forgives us, and we are sent. It turns out there is still unfinished business in this world; there are still ghosts to be dealt with. So many of us are still haunted by shame, hatred, bigotry, selfishness, and the list goes on. And the witnesses Jesus sends are not super-sterilized saints: they are beggars who have found bread, Peters who have been revitalized, sinners who have been forgiven: Jesus’s witnesses are all of us. Instead of more ghost stories, can we, by our words and lives, welcome our neighbors into the arms of the risen Jesus? **Amen.**