

3rd Sunday of Easter – 18th April 2021

Luke 24:36-48

By Stuart Vince

Ghostly characters

I think that authors and script writers just love the concept of ghosts. Just look at how often they appear in both modern and classical literature. There has been a recent comedy series on BBC called Ghosts. A young married couple move into a decrepit mansion which is full of ghosts from across the centuries, from caveman to modern politician. The humour is based upon the fact that the wife can see and interact with the ghosts whereas the husband cannot.

There was the film 'Ghost' starring Patrick Swayze and Demi Moore. I think that Whoopie Goldberg won an Oscar for her performance in the film. Patrick Swayze's character is killed, and the film is about his attempts to protect Demi Moore's character from his murderer. Again, he can communicate with only one person – a charlatan and fraudulent medium Whoopie Goldberg. Swayze was a heart throb, and the scene where he supports Demi Moore as she makes a clay pot on her potter's wheel was very popular at the time. I couldn't see what the fuss was about.

In classical literature we have Dicken's novel A Christmas Carol with Marley's ghost and the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future. Ghosts and the supernatural let Dickens weave fantasy into a moralistic tale upon which a great deal of popular sentiment about Christmas is based. Our most illustrious author, Shakespeare, used a ghost in one of his most popular plays, Macbeth. Banquo's ghost is central to the torment and angst that tears Macbeth apart.

Ghosts are popular with authors because ghosts can do whatever the author wants them to do. They are not governed by the natural laws of physics that we are governed by. You want Scrooge to see what the future holds for him if he doesn't change? Easy - let a ghost take him into that future. You want to show the torment that a man feels for having betrayed and murdered his best friend? Easy – bring a ghost on stage. Comic situations are created because a character is surrounded by lots of people that they are not able to see, or characters can do things like walk into rooms through walls. Slapstick potential abounds. If you get stuck when making a film or writing a book, consider getting a ghost to help the plot along.

Non-Ghostly Jesus

Is this literary strategy taking place in the story of the Gospels? Has a ghost been introduced into the plot because the gospel writers are finding it hard to get home the point they are trying to incorporate into their books? The story has Jesus showing some of the ploys and tricks that we have seen used by authors, playwrights and script writers in famous book, films and plays. Jesus appears and disappears at will in locked rooms. He spends time with people who have known him very well in life yet is not recognised. Have you ever thought what form or how Jesus changed when he did rise from the tomb? What sort of body did Jesus have?

The point is that Jesus has been raised from the dead, and so the body that he has must be different from the body that he had when he was alive in the way that we are alive. St. Paul talks about what resurrection of the body means in Chapter 15 of the first letter to the Corinthians. Paul describes Jesus as being the first fruit of those who have fallen asleep (! Cor 15:20). Paul sees Jesus as being the first embodiment of an individual in a new world, a world that combines this earthly world with the spiritual new world that God will create, an

act of creation that is parallel to the original act of creation. The world is different, and because the new creation is different it follows that for us to exist in the new world our bodies must be different to those that work in this first creation of God. God created humans, Adam and Eve, for this earth, our earth. Jesus is the first from this earth to move into God's new world, the heavenly world. His new body belongs to both the dimensions of God's worlds, in both heaven and earth. He moves from the new world to this old world and back again. At the end of the book of Revelation, heaven and earth will finally be joined as one, so there will not be the need for such a movement between the worlds that God has and will create.

Our bodies and our understanding of how bodies behave is an earthly perspective. Jesus is of heaven and earth, and we cannot understand what this means. We just cannot comprehend because we have no knowledge or experience of the heavenly world. We who live on this earth, even as Christians, with our thinking conditioned by our experience of sin and death, find it such a huge struggle to try and comprehend what life after we leave this world will be like, and just what did happen when Jesus came back from being dead.

It is a characteristic of humanity that we seek to explain discover, and to understand what happens around us, and make those explanations cover all aspects of our experiences. We have this urge to explore, to discover, to define and comprehend. Douglas Adams in his writing of the Hitchhikers guide to the Galaxy somewhat cynically summed up this seeking for knowledge by saying the answer to the ultimate question of life, the universe and everything is 42. In Adam's book, the problem was that no one could understand the question, let alone what the answer meant. We have to accept that we cannot and will not understand what God intends for us when life on this earth ends. Faith is an apt word to describe what we must seek to have.

Resurrected Jesus

In our reading, when Jesus appears among the group of followers, the first thing he does is to dismiss the literary ploy that I talked about earlier. He goes out of his way to prove that he is not a ghost, not an ethereal spirit that does not belong in this world that appears and disappears in an unnatural way. He demonstrates that he truly is a physical presence, that he can be touched. He does a similar thing when he appears to Thomas in the account in John's gospel. His wounds are still present, and he invites Thomas to touch them and place his hand in the wounds. He has not been resurrected in a completely new body but in some way that is based upon his body that existed at death. He eats with the disciples which reinforces his physical presence in this world.

Having established that he is Jesus, that he is the same person that died on the cross and that he has returned to them from being dead, he conducts a Bible study with the group just as he did to Cleopas and his companion, perhaps Mrs Cleopas, on the road to Emmaus. He opens the understanding of the group to the continuity of God's actions throughout his dealings with humanity, and where he, Jesus, fits in. He then promises them that he will send the Holy Spirit to them, and commissions them to preach forgiveness and repentance throughout the world when the Spirit is with them.

This then is the commission that he gives us. We must accept that Jesus rose from the dead. We must accept that the crucifixion is a sacrifice by Jesus on our behalf to take the consequences of being sinners from us. With our faith in these facts secure, we must then take our belief, the message of the cross, into the world. As Jesus said, we are witnesses of these things. Witnesses testify to what they know. Let us go from here and give out our testimony to all that we meet.