

Living In The White – Georgann Kurtz-Shaw

Acts 3:12-19; Psalm 4; 1 John 3:1-7; Luke 24:36b-48

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! If Easter is starting to feel like a distant memory, wake yourself up. We are still living in the white. As we say in our Godly Play curriculum with the children, we can't keep Easter in just one Sunday. It keeps going for six more Sundays because it takes a long time to come close to a mystery as great as Easter. So on this third Sunday of Easter, we continue to dwell in the mystery that Jesus died but God somehow made him alive again. Alleluia!

In our Gospel lesson that I just read, we get a second perspective on Jesus' appearance to the disciples in the upper room after his death and resurrection. Unlike John's version of this story that we heard last week, Thomas is not the primary questioner among the disciples. Luke says that while the group was listening to the two disciples describe their encounter with Jesus on the road to Emmaus, Jesus was suddenly standing among them. This is the mystery of Easter—that Jesus died but somehow God made him alive and present again. Here he is present again with his disciples.

Even though Jesus greeted them in his typical way, *Peace be with you*, the text tells us that the disciples were *startled and terrified*. They did not recognize Jesus, their Savior, the man they had broken bread with many times. In fact, in Luke's words, they *thought that they were seeing a ghost*. Even though at the moment he appeared they were hearing about his recent encounter with their friends on the road to Emmaus, the disciples as a group, according to Luke, now assumed Jesus to be some sort of apparition.

Now before we condemn the disciples for their stupidity in not recognizing Jesus, we need to remember that ghosts and spirits were fairly common in Greco-Roman tradition. In fact they are fairly common throughout the history of folklore and literature from the Odyssey to Hamlet to Scooby Doo and Moaning Myrtle and Nearly Headless Nick. Earlier, Jesus had already vanished from sight when he was sitting at the table breaking bread with the two disciples he had met on the road.

So it's not far-fetched for them to believe that Jesus has come back as a ghost or spirit of some sort. Like other returning spirits throughout our literary memory, Jesus has plenty he could do when he comes back to earth—visit his loved ones, torment his tormentors. But Jesus isn't the ideal Greco-Roman "ghost." He isn't a disembodied spirit or mummy. Luke tells us that this Jesus has a physical body. He eats broiled fish with them. Jesus shows them his scars and tells them to touch his body so that they will both see and feel that he has flesh and bones. This is the mystery of Easter. Jesus died, but God somehow made him alive and present with the disciples again in a new and different way. They may not have fully recognized him, but he is still present and acting in their world and in their lives.

In our post-Pentecost reading from Acts 3, the author narrates the story of Peter reprimanding the Israelites at the temple for not recognizing Jesus as Messiah. Peter and John are at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they have just healed the man who has been lame from birth. The verse preceding

our passage tells us that when the people there saw what had happened, they *ran together to them . . . utterly astonished*. When they did this, the disciples didn't have much choice besides responding to the crowd that had gathered. According to the author, Peter takes this opportunity to deliver a strong challenge to them. In verse 12 he begins: *You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk?* Then Peter links Jesus to their and his scriptural heritage. According to Peter, Jesus has been *glorified by the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob*—the Israelite's God. And according to the author's account of Peter's speech, the Israelites defied their God even though Pilate was planning to release Jesus. Peter's tone is strong and accusatory. Look at all the second-person pronouns throughout this passage: *you Israelites, you wonder, you stare, you handed over and rejected, you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, you killed the Author of life*.

Peter says that it is the one they killed, this *Author of life*, in whose name the lame man has been allowed to walk. They had been waiting and watching for the Messiah, but they missed him when he came. According to Peter in verse 17, they *acted in ignorance*, and their ignorance led them to hatred and to murder. But despite his strong condemnation of the Israelites' actions in crucifying Jesus, Peter declares them forgivable. Peter tells them that once they recognize Jesus as Messiah as he has, their sins may be wiped out. Peter's sermon began as a severe judgment, but ends as a proclamation of love. This is the mystery of Easter. In response to their ignorance and hatred, God gave healing, salvation, and hope.

So who crucified Jesus? Some have historically misread Peter's accusatory words in this passage in order to adopt anti-Semitic positions. In doing that, they have missed Peter's central argument here. Peter himself was a Jew. His three denials of Christ suggest that he too didn't fully recognize Jesus as Messiah. Jewish leaders were plotting to catch Jesus, but Roman soldiers arrested him. Perhaps more appropriate questions to ask would be, "Who didn't crucify Jesus?" and "Who doesn't crucify Jesus?" If we're honest, in our ignorance we crucify him day after day.

We crucify Jesus when we overlook the poor in our community. We crucify Jesus when we spend our money selfishly. We crucify Jesus when we fail to speak up for people whose voices aren't heard. We crucify Jesus when we ignore the harmful impact our choices have on the earth and on people throughout the world. We crucify Jesus when we don't look at one another as if we are looking at Jesus. We crucify Jesus in our ignorance.

Like the Israelites who Peter addresses, our ignorance often keeps us from recognizing Jesus as Messiah and leads us to crucify him. But we have great reason to hope. We are living in the white—the mystery of Easter—and that means new life can be ours. We can receive healing whether we have been lame from birth or have crucified the Lord. Because of the mystery of Easter, even in our confused seeking, even when we lose our way and condemn our Lord to death, God is waiting here for us with new life.

I often think about how my church experience growing up was vastly different from our daughter Mathea's experience growing up at St. Paul's. I was reminded of this in February when Billy Graham died. When I was explaining to Mathea who Billy Graham was, I remembered the time my church youth group drove two hours to the University of Illinois to hear Graham speak. For those of you too young to know, Billy Graham conducted evangelistic crusades in stadium-sized venues around the

world from 1947 to 2005, for nearly six decades, and for years many of those crusades were broadcast on prime-time television—back when we really had prime-time television. Graham was a charismatic preacher, so charismatic that one episode of The Crown (not on prime-time TV) chronicles his impact on Queen Elizabeth II. Each night of his crusades, Graham would end the service with an altar call as the packed stadium sang all the verses of the hymn “Just As I Am.”

We had a lot of altar calls at my home church. Typically we had weeklong revivals twice a year, and every night of every revival that I can remember ended in an altar call. Billy Graham didn’t get me to the altar that night at the U of I, but I’m guessing between the revivals we had at church every year and two weeks of family and youth church camps every summer, I was probably well into the double digits.

So my church experience growing up was different than what the children of St. Paul’s experience. We don’t have weeklong revivals. We don’t have “altar calls”, . . . or do we? Pastor Rick taught me that we do. We have an altar call and a congregation-full of conversions every time we recite the communion liturgy, confess our sins, and come forward to receive Christ’s body and blood.

It’s easy to overlook or forget what we’re saying in the liturgy each Sunday. Let’s wake ourselves up to the words today. As we recite the words and come forward together, let’s think about ways in which we ignorantly crucify Jesus and what it would mean to embrace the mystery of Easter more fully at St. Paul’s, in Greenville, Illinois, in our nation, and in our world. As the epistle reading reminds us, if the world *did not know him*, it should *not know us* either. Thanks be to God for the mystery that is Easter.