

Easter 3 (B)  
April 18, 2021  
Text: Luke 24:36b-48

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A friend of mine in middle school swore that her house was haunted. She said that sometimes there would be creaking noises in the kitchen at night. Fairly regularly, someone in her family would find a light turned on, but everyone said they weren't the one who turned it on. Or there might be a drawer or cabinet door pulled open. And, she said, the basement felt incredibly creepy. She was sure there was a ghost in her house. I wasn't sure what to believe. I mean, I'd never seen a ghost, but my friend was completely convinced. I may have been a little bit skeptical, but I had to admit that her story made me wonder.

In our gospel story for today, Luke wants to be certain we understand that when the disciples saw Jesus risen from the dead, they were not seeing a ghost. Jesus showed them his hands and his feet—proof that it really was Jesus and he really was physically present with them. And if that wasn't enough, Jesus asked if they had anything to eat, and when they gave him a piece of broiled fish, he ate it—and ghosts don't eat. It made me wonder why Luke would include so much detail to prove that Jesus wasn't a ghost. It led me to wonder whether the real issue is Jesus' power, and whether Jesus is able meet us with real power to help—power to help us.

I truly doubt my friend in middle school would have ever said that the ghost in her house was helpful. It never closed cupboard doors that had been left open, or turned off lights that had been left on. If there was a ghost, it was the opposite of helpful. In fact, I don't think ghost stories are usually about helpful ghosts. Instead, it seems that more often ghost stories suggest that a haunting is about someone who's died, but they're not ready to move on, not ready to release their grip on some place. They're still working their own stuff out—maybe on the house they used to live in, or on the people who live there now. As such, they could never be of any help to anyone else because they're still too caught up in their own stuff.

But not Jesus. He had died, but then passed on through death into a new life, a resurrection life. Jesus was not stuck! And when he appeared to his frightened followers, he spoke to address their needs. He said, "Peace be with you." He opened their minds to understand the scriptures. And then, looking beyond that small group of disciples, Jesus looked to the needs of the whole world for forgiveness and reconciliation. Risen from the dead, Jesus meets us where we are with the help we need most, where we are most stuck—not only individually, but also as the whole human family.

We're stuck in the mistakes of the past, the cruelty and injustice of the past. All of our relationships are limited and shaped by the pain we've caused and the pain we've received. Individually, perhaps we continue to carry the pain of bad choices, or grief and loss, or cruelty inflicted by others. And as the human family, we continue to carry the pain created by colonialism and slavery, by tyrants and demagogues, by poverty and racism and intolerance and war. That past is never really gone. For example, in our country the legacy of that past continues to produce poverty and over-policing for Black Americans and unearned privilege and opportunities for White Americans. It continues to produce injustice and pain and death.

As a result, we end up working our stuff out on others—over and over again. Sadly, all too often it seems like we're barely aware of what is bubbling away inside us or how we've been conditioned to see others. But then the result is always the same. We get defensive, or strike out in anger, or retreat in fear. Individually and corporately, how often do we work our stuff out on each other—and in the process create more hurt, more misunderstanding, more alienation. And we just get more stuck.

That's why we need Jesus so much. He's not stuck. He's not working his stuff out on anyone else, which means he is able to help us. Jesus has power to heal and save us. And in our gospel reading for today, Jesus summarizes his healing and saving work in terms of repentance and forgiveness. Repentance is a change of mind and a change of heart—turning away from a dead end where we were stuck so we can embrace a new way. And forgiveness is releasing the hurts of the past, being set free from the grip of the past. Repentance and forgiveness are both about getting unstuck. And they're also both challenging because they require truly coming to terms with the past. They mean refusing to pretend that everything is OK.

Repentance can be tremendously hard work because it requires admitting we were wrong, or acknowledging that something we said or did was harmful. Repentance might require letting our guard down long enough to come to terms with the ways we have caused hurt or contributed to hurt or played a role in perpetuating hurt. Repentance is about owning our part when things have gone wrong. Repentance is the first step toward making things right.

Forgiveness can be tremendously hard too, because it requires really coming to terms with the hurt we have suffered, instead of denying it, and then dealing with the grief and anger and sadness, and then choosing to let go of the hurt and let go of the right to strike back. Forgiveness is about not letting the past define us as victims, and instead choosing the way of healing and freedom to move forward. Forgiveness is the first step toward reconciliation, toward a new and right relationship.

We need Jesus, risen from the dead, to lead us there. We need Jesus to show us the way. And here's what Jesus does. First, he forgives us. He showers us with God's freely given mercy and grace so that we can know that nothing stands between us and his strong love, so our hearts can be unstuck. And then, he commissions us to be agents of his work, agents of repentance and forgiveness, just like he commissioned those first disciples in that upper room. It's all about being participants in the same work God has been up to from the beginning—to heal and renew the human family.

Dear people of God, God is still at work to bring healing to the human family, now through your words, through your hands and feet. This whole journey of life is defined first of all by God's forgiveness for you. Each step of the way is powered by God's abundant grace and mercy poured out for you. And I wonder how you experience Jesus showing you the way to follow, the way of being unstuck. I wonder what gifts God is nurturing in you to work for repentance and forgiveness, both in your relationships and in the whole wide world around you. I give thanks that God is powering this healing work through you. Amen.