



Third Sunday of Easter
Rev. Jonathan Stepp
May 5, 2019
John 21:1-19

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A few years back, when I was doing faith formation with teenagers, I invented a Bible trivia game I called “Zombie, Ghost, Resuscitation, or Resurrection.” The kids would split into teams and they could score points by correctly identifying which of those four categories a character from the Bible or literature fit into. So, for example if I said “Casper” the answer was, of course, “ghost.” Or if I said dangerous monsters in the TV show “The Walking Dead” the answer was “Zombie.”

The point of the game was to help the kids think about what the Bible is describing when it describes the resurrection of Jesus. For obvious reasons we usually played this game during the Easter season when we read stories like the one today from John’s gospel – where the risen Christ meets the disciples on the seashore. Sometimes it could get tricky. You had to know your pop-culture references. For example, you had to know who Pinky, Binky, Inky, and Clyde were (the ghosts in the Video Game “Pac-Man”) and you had to be able understand the full implications of different Bible stories.

Lazarus was always a tough one in this regard. He was the brother of Martha and Mary whom Jesus raised from the dead in John chapter 11. We often refer to his return to life as the “resurrection of Lazarus” but the Gospel of John makes it pretty clear that Lazarus’ return to life was not a resurrection like what Jesus experienced. Lazarus wasn’t raised to eternal life, he was brought back to a mortal life – even though that return took place three whole days after he died. Lazarus experienced a resuscitation because, like anyone resuscitated by, say, a Doctor or an EMT, Lazarus would end up dying once again.

I bring all this up on this third Sunday of Easter because I have seen over my years of pastoral ministry that we all struggle to wrap our heads around what resurrection actually is. Of course, in all this I’m setting aside a very pressing question: can we even believe these stories about Lazarus, Jesus, and others to be true?

I'm not asking right now "are these stories true?" I'm asking "what is it that these stories are even claiming? What is it, exactly, that we are being asked to believe?"

In order to better understand how the resurrected Christ differs from a ghost in a ghost story, or a friend we might have who was resuscitated after a heart attack, we have to piece together several different passages of scripture. In I Corinthians 15, for example, we have St. Paul's description of what resurrection is – and his would be the earliest Christian writing on the subject because he wrote before the Gospels were finished. Paul basically says that resurrection is the transformation of a human being from something that can die into something that can never die. He compares it to planting a wheat seed. The seed goes into the ground, and in a sense it dies there, and then it sprouts up out of the ground as something new and different. It is now a wheat stalk instead of a seed. In a somewhat similar way, he says, human bodies perish and are placed in the ground and one day they will come out of the earth as something new and different: as resurrected people.

St. Paul says that we can know that this is our future after death because that is what happened to Jesus after his death and the gospel message is that we are united by God's grace to Jesus and therefore his destiny has become our destiny. The Gospel stories of the resurrection seem to generally agree with what Paul believed. So, here, in the story at the seaside that we heard today we see that Jesus is alive, he is still Jesus, but he has been transformed by resurrection into someone who will never die again.

In other places in the Gospels Jesus' new, resurrected life is spelled out in even more detail. In Luke 24, for example, Luke says that when the disciples first saw him they were afraid because they thought he was a ghost. But Jesus said to them "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." In that story Luke says that Jesus went on to prove that he wasn't a ghost by eating a piece of broiled fish in front of them.

And that's an interesting parallel to today's story. Jesus cooks fish on the open fire and even though John doesn't specifically say that Jesus ate some of it – as Luke does – it seems to be implied by the fact that John says "when *they* had finished breakfast."

So, what is it that the Bible is claiming? The claim is that three days after Jesus died he was raised to a new kind of life – a life of resurrection – in which he was still fully human but now his body was transformed. Even though he had a body and could walk, talk, be touched, and even eat, that body was profoundly trans-

formed – St. Paul calls it “the glorified body” – it was transformed, for example, because it was now capable of appearing and disappearing at will and, most importantly, this resurrected Jesus will never die again.

So, what does all this have to do with us? It certainly calls us to believe some remarkable things about the nature of reality that go very much against our everyday experience. In that regard, though, it has often occurred to me that if I am prepared to believe that a Triune God of love created me and all things, then it is not really that big of a stretch to go on and believe that this God can resurrect the dead, transform the creation from perishable to imperishable, and create a new heaven and a new earth where resurrected humanity will never die. If God exists then it doesn't seem too far of stretch to believe that God loved Jesus – and loves us – enough to raise us up to new life.

And, if I am persuaded that Christ is risen and that I will someday be raised up in resurrection with him, then that seems to be very good news indeed. Because it means that my eternal future is not to be spent floating on a cloud somewhere playing a harp, like a character in a Bugs Bunny cartoon, and my future is not to haunt my favorite places as a ghost, nor is my future to simply wink out of existence and be gone forever. My future – your future – is to be like Jesus: alive, reunited with friends around the campfire, and chowing down on some nice grilled fish.

If that's the future God has planned for us in Christ then maybe God really does love us.

Amen.