

Unfinished Business
Acts 3:12-19, Luke 24:36b-48
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According to local legend, about 12 miles south of where I grew up in Whiteville, North Carolina, there is a haunted bridge in the heart of the Monie Swamp. You'll find it by winding down a dirt road until you're surrounded above and beside by a thick canopy of trees. Peek over the railing and you'll find yourself hovering only a few feet above ominously murky waters. And that, my friends, is only in the daylight.

In the evening hours, it's said, there is a presence that haunts this isolated scene. If you are brave enough to park your car, roll down your windows, cut the engine off, and close your eyes, you may just hear—emanating from the depths of the swamp—the steady beating of a heart that is not your own.

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Nothing captures human imagination quite like a ghost story. These tales have the power to draw us around a campfire, or send us peering through the windows of the town's old jailhouse, or wandering through an overgrown, long-abandoned cemetery. They bring us close to what we fear most—death. And against *its* backdrop our imaginations weave our anxieties into most unsettling tales.

There are varying stories of Heartbeat Bridge, as it's known. Though none have been verified, they all converge on this point: the ghostly heartbeat you hear is of a woman betrayed.

I dare not share their gorier details, but suffice it to say that whichever legend brings you to Heartbeat Bridge, it's a tale gruesome enough to raise the hair on the back of your neck. It might make your heart race *even* as you sit still, listening for sounds in the dark, desolate swamp.

Maybe that's the genius of it all—that it's only *your* heartbeat you hear, in the end. But the injustice and the violence of this woman's story is so egregious as to tempt you to believe in the impossible. If the story *were* true, you wonder, wouldn't it leave an indelible mark on this place? Maybe something of her *does* linger here.

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This is why the notion of “unfinished business” animates such ghostly tales. I bet each of you knows a story like this from *your* hometown. In sharing mine with others this week, I've heard variations of similar legends from similar sites.

Whether shared around the campfire, portrayed in film or literature, or retold on one of those “ghost tours,” these stories are often rooted in the lingering presence of trauma and violence. Most often of the marginalized—women, black people suffering under enslavement, or those with mental illness. They serve as cautionary tales of deep moral injury, collapsing the injustice of the past forebodingly onto the present.

These stories *haunt* us, in every sense of the word.

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And if ghost stories had the same resonance for the disciples in the first century as they have for us today, I can understand why Jesus' sudden appearance was deeply unsettling. Notice the Gospel writer's painstaking effort to let the reader know that Jesus was certainly, surely, absolutely NOT a ghost.

Today's passage is told against the backdrop of death.

There is clearly a lingering presence of trauma and violence in the story.

It's rooted in the most egregious injustice and moral injury imaginable.

And although the disciples were "startled," "terrified," and "frightened" at the sudden appearance of a man who was *definitely* dead not long ago...

According to Luke this is certainly, surely, absolutely NOT a ghost story. Maybe we'll call it a *non-ghost* story.

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Christ appears to his disciples not as a disembodied spirit but as an *enfleshed* being—and a hungry one at that.

For the gospel writers, and for the disciples themselves, Jesus' flesh and bone made all the difference. And I'm left wondering what difference they should make for us who read the story today...

The more I sit with Luke's insistence that Christ's story is not a ghost story, the more wisdom I see in his careful distinction.

You see, these stories of Christ's appearance are not meant to haunt us but to *hallow* us. Jesus speaks *peace* to hearts filled with terror and stirs *wonder* in minds weighed by doubt. He offers the most tender parts of himself to be touched by those he loves. And just a few verses below today's passage Jesus lifts his wounded hands and offers them a blessing.

So, yes, in Christ's wounds the disciples can see the lingering presence of trauma—imprints of the violence that took his life. But far from a spirit trapped in the past and left haunting the present, Jesus boasts flesh liberated from death. His story is not suspended—it continues today! His *body* points us toward another possibility—a *future, in fact*—in which the wounded become healers.

If ghost stories enliven our imaginations to the lingering specter of violence, trauma, and death, this *non-ghost* story awakens us to the possibilities for healing, wholeness, and life.

So, yes, in this story there is certainly “unfinished business.” But there is no disembodied Jesus lingering by a tomb, or trapped haunting Golgotha. Instead there appears before us a living savior in flesh and bone. And that, my friends, makes all the difference.

For we are witnesses, Christ tells us, to resurrection power, to the possibility of life beyond violence. He instructs us to proclaim repentance and forgiveness, to point the world away from sin and death toward a future brought out from under the shadow of the violence of the cross.

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But just turn on the news, friends, and it’s clear that we live in a present haunted by the power of crucifixion.

Our systems of policing are haunted by the slave patrols from which they came.

Our prisons are haunted by the enduring legacy of chattel slavery.

Our planet is haunted by continued exploitation.

Our queer siblings are haunted by persistent violence.

Our healthcare system is haunted by structural inequities.

I could go on and on.

But perhaps most sobering of all, as we’ve explored in Dan Vermeer’s provocative course on environmental justice, our children’s future, and their children’s future, will be haunted by the action or inaction we choose today.

And I’ll admit that there’s something tiring about preaching these headlines over and over again. The wounds are fresh, yet eerily similar to those of the past, and they’re not easy to look at.

But we’ve seen them, folks, and can no longer live as if these imprints of violence don’t matter. We have seen Christ’s wounded hands. We have touched them. We have been blessed by them. Now we must *be* his hands in the world.

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So what if this *non*-ghost story were to grip our imaginations? What communities might we gather around the retelling of its wisdom? What sort of desolate places might it send us to—with hearts filled not with fear but with the hope of resurrection?

What sort of future might we dare to imagine if we touch the tender places of Christ’s body today? Of our body politic? Attentive, yes, to the imprint of trauma but all the while embodying—*enfleshing*—resistance against its power?

Friends, we, now, are the body of Christ. The wounds we carry matter, but they will not have the final say. And if we offer these tender places to others in trusted and loving community, they become a testament not to the power of death but to the persistence of life. They become openings not just to flesh but to *a future* marked by resurrection.

Christ is risen.

This is a celebration of good news, yes. But it is also a declaration of intent.

Today we gather ‘round, and are mesmerized by this *non-ghost* story. But we are also called to live as co-conspirators with the resurrection life that animates it.

I see you, United Church, and your commitment to this movement. I see you touching the world’s tender wounds and embodying good news.

You’re holding space for one another to grieve the crises facing our planet and deepening our church’s witness on environmental justice.

You’re raising funds for re-entry programs, tending to the imprisoned, where Christ has been waiting for us.

You’re gathering weekly for Black Lives Matter vigils and bearing witness to a faith built on solidarity with the crucified.

And young people, we’ve heard your call for our church to become an actively anti-racist and queer-affirming congregation.

There’s actually far more than I could share here. But it’s important that we continue to gather ‘round these stories, and that they send us forth to hallow a haunted world. That we continue blessing from wounded hands—and offering healing and wholeness to the broken.

With every declaration that another world is possible, we proclaim that Christ is risen indeed.

So call it a *non-ghost* story, call it a resurrection story. Call it whatever you want but never fail to share it. To gather ‘round campfires and retell it. To open your imagination to it and embody the possibilities within it. We’ve got unfinished business, after all.

Oh, and, by the way, if you really like ghost stories—well you just hang on ‘til Pentecost. **Amen.**