

“SEE, IT IS I, I AM NOT A GHOST; GO, BE WITNESSES”

A sermon for April 15, 2018, by the Rev. Dr. James Mutayoba
The Third Sunday of Easter

Gospel: **Luke 24:36b-48**

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’ They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He 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.’ And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, ‘Have you anything here to eat?’ They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.

Then he said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.

In 1987, I had been serving as a missionary in Sweden for just one month when something unusual happened. I woke in the middle of the night to go to the washroom. I had to go across the living room. Immediately after I stepped out of the bedroom into the living room, I saw in a vision, my sister Edna all dressed up in dazzling white with a baby on her lap. Within the blink of an eye she was lost out of my sight. I stood there trying to make sense of what I had seen and what it meant. I went back to bed but couldn't sleep. The next morning, I received a phone call telling me that my sister Edna had passed while in labor. I quickly understood the meaning of the glorious vision of my sister that I had seen. It was a vision of my sister in an afterlife. Like the disciples in the gospel story, I too, was terrified by the vision that I had seen. It created a crisis within me.

None of us is immune from grief and sorrow; whether we're rich or poor. Death in the family can lead to an emotional crisis that we have no control over. Any crisis takes us by surprise and fills us with anxiety. It forces us to change our priorities and plans. After a crisis, we tend to blame ourselves, others, or God.

For the disciples it felt safer to lock themselves inside a house after their Lord had been crucified -- it was crisis. Locking themselves inside gave them some comfort. But it also stopped them from fulfilling their calling -- they could not fish for men. Staying inside meant locking themselves away from the outside world.

It was isolating to be inside. It was like being blind-folded. But that is what the disciples were feeling. Locked inside! While they remained locked in that room, there could be no new life strategy.

They had only themselves to talk to. What more could they say to each other? They had already shared everything they knew among themselves. There was no way to separate the reasonable from the ridiculous, the useful from the useless. The expression “thinking inside the box” fitted them. The disciples had boxed themselves in when they needed to be out of the box. They needed a strategy for their ministry. Isolated and on their own, they had failed.

At this juncture, the confused disciples needed some type of divine intervention. Jesus miraculously appeared among them to ease their fear and confusion. To set them on the mission of making disciples.

The first words that Jesus said to his disoriented disciples were “**Peace be with you!**” But the frightened disciples did not recognize the Lord in his resurrected body -- they thought he was a ghost.

This suggests that Christ’s risen body may have been somehow different from the earthly body that they were familiar with. And a ghost would be the adversary, the oppressor of God’s people. The very one who had caused the ills and sorrows of mankind, from the Garden of Eden to this point in history.

But consider, ghosts have no physical body. They cannot be touched even though they may see them. And Jesus’ risen body was not like that of a phantom -- it could be touched. They did not see a mere vision, not a hallucination, or something imagined. He was the risen Lord with a physical body -- a perfected and glorified body. A perfected and glorified body that is not subject to human limitations and frailties.

Not only did Jesus confer upon them **Shalom**, he also identified himself to them saying, “**I am not a ghost.**” Jesus was not a ghostly adversary to harm them.

Then, how did the Lord’s resurrected body differ from his earthly body?

- We know his body looked like the same body after closer observation.
- His disciples could recognize the wounds on his hands and his side.
- The body was not limited by time and space, by material or substance.
- It could travel and appear at any place and at any time without limitation. Jesus could make sudden appearances even behind locked doors.
- It was a body that could be recognized after closely observing it.
 - Mary Magdalene thought he was a Gardner;
 - the two disciples walking to Emmaus thought he was a traveler;
 - the fishing disciples did not recognize him standing on the seashore.

In each case, they recognized him after a closer observation.

From the text we can somehow explain how the resurrected body of a believer will look. We know from Christ that it will be a kind of body that is close to Christ’s own resurrected body. We are promised that this body will conform to the image of God’s Son. *We shall be like him.* In 1 Corinthians 15:42, the Bible says, “**What**

is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. ⁴³ It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. ⁴⁴ It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body.”

Clearly, there two kinds of bodies: “**heavenly body and earthly body, but the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another.**” The believer will be the same person in heaven but his body will be perfected and glorified. The believer **will no longer be flesh and blood**, for flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven. Flesh and blood are corruptible. Like the Lord’s resurrected body, we will recognize one another **in heaven**.

Jesus appeared to them to take away their fears and to commission them once again. He knew that it was ineffective for the disciples to lock themselves inside a room. The disciples could not accomplish their calling to serve as apostles while locked in.

- they could not go out in the world to talk about Jesus;
- they could not verify Mary Magdalene’s claim;
- or tell their own eyewitness account of seeing the resurrected Lord.

They needed to go out into the world and give witness about Jesus’ victory over death.

When Jesus appeared to the disciples it was as if to tell them: **get out of here!** In reality, he told them that “**you are free**” and “**you are now sent out.**” Jesus equipped the disciples **with his peace** and **with the guidance of the Holy Spirit** and **his protection** before he could send them out into the world.

The disciple’s status was changed from that of a disciple (follower) to that of an apostle (one sent out). They became members of the apostolic team. Their ministry was to **go out and forgive sins of any**. That is why our worship service begins with the Brief Order of Confession and Forgiveness. Authority to forgive sins is given to all ministers by Jesus.

As a result of the Lord’s resurrection, all believers are equipped with the power of the Holy Spirit for witnessing and forgiving sins. We are clothed with this power of the Holy Spirit to forgive sins of those that repent.

Jesus comes into our midst to free us from self-imprisonment because of fear. The Lord Jesus comes to us to send us out to be apostles, just as he sent the disciples into a hostile world and freed them from their fear and self-isolation. It was and is to enable and to fulfill the mission of forgiving sins.

Why the ministry of forgiving sins? When we go out to forgive others, **we free ourselves** first AND **set others free**.

Think about it !

When we forgive the sins of any, we do it for our own sakes.

- We take the burden off **our** shoulders when we forgive those who wrong us.
- We untie the self-made noose from the neck and
- loosen our own trap.
- We can breathe freely when we meet the person who wronged us.
- That person can no longer control our life and our emotions.
- He or she is no longer a burden to us every time we see him or her and we are not a burden to him or her.
- Chains are broken for we are no longer paralyzed by un-forgiveness.

Jesus comes to us to give us **PEACE**. Peace that frees us to **receive the Holy Spirit and power to become apostles** (i.e. the ones sent out) to proclaim and give forgiveness on Christ's behalf. It is our duty to **call people to repentance** since we are **forgiven. It is expected of us** to repent and be forgiven first. What a blessing can it be to live in a world whose people are forgiven and are more than willing to forgive others!

Amen.