

Ghost Stories

3 Easter B, 4/14/24

One of my favorite movies, as I may have mentioned, is *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*. One of my favorite lines from that movie, spoken by a pirate captain described as “so evil that hell itself spat him back out,” goes like this: “You’d best start believing in ghost stories, Miss Turner. You’re in one!” Aye, that she is. Miss Turner, who is actually named Miss Swan, has been kidnapped by pirates who are looking for a medallion she wears around her neck. She doesn’t know why they want it; does not every pirate, indeed most every person, lust for gold? In this case, though, it’s not simply that the medallion is made of gold that draws the pirates to it. It’s what kind of gold, and what story its own ghosts have to tell.

Stealing that gold has cursed the pirates, making them neither living nor dead. The pirate captain explains to our heroine why this is, ending with the line I quoted earlier. What follows is a *danse macabre* in which the undead pirates toss about and rather terrify our heroine. She sees now that though the world she’s fallen into is quite mad, there’s method to it. She has no idea, yet, what to do. Cold comfort, but also correct assessment, would she find Hamlet’s famous line to his best friend: “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” Indeed, there are. What do we do when those “more” become “too much”? Well, that depends.

See, what exceeds our imagination can amaze us, terrify us, or do both. That category of aesthetics we call the sublime denotes what happens when it does both. ‘Wonder’ is the term what amazes. ‘Horror’ denotes what terrifies. Monday’s eclipse, and humanity’s collective gawp and gasp at it, struck me as wondrous. The sudden snap, crackle, and fall of the Key Bridge in Baltimore, not far from my home, was a horror and a tragedy. Yet

each had something of the other, which I suppose makes them sublime. There was in the eclipse a reminder of how small we are, how contingent are the conditions for our lives here, and that one day the sun will go out for good. Much the same underlay the horror of an engineering marvel being smashed down in seconds, killing six good men. Yet amazing were the first responders, and those who warned them of what was about to happen. They saved many lives, then fought like all that is holy to save more.

To see such things, to hear of them, and to know them changes a person. Such intimations of mortality also remind us that what Hamlet says is true: there's a great deal that we don't know, haven't even imagined. There may even be things we cannot know or even imagine. Some of them are horrors. Some are wonders. Some have in them a bit of both. Thus sublime is the world.

But ghost stories? Ah, these we know in a different way. They tend to domesticate the sublime, does it with the soporific analgesia of entertainment, if with a stab now and then, should occasion serve. There are conventions, rules, tropes to ghost stories that one ignores at one's peril, even if one only uses them ironically. Whatever haunts us from the realm of the dead, or lingers in our minds from the realm of shadows lost than once had substance seemed, has only so much presence as light and darkness allow. Ghosts are not otherwise real. They cannot do things. They cannot eat; they cannot drink. The plots of both *Pirates* and *Hamlet* turn on these conventions. Ghosts don't eat, don't rest, and don't bring peace. Instead, they offer moan-ful reminders that there is no peace, and that much is left undone and never to be done once a life comes to an end. As it will. As it must – and as the disciples in the stories we heard this morning knew just as well as we do. Ghosts do not eat. What comes (back) from the world of the dead does not come from the world of the living.

Or so they thought – Jesus's disciples, that is.

But there he was. Jesus, that is.

Appearing. Right in the midst of them. On the other side of a solid wall. On the other side of a still-closed door.

No-one had seen him coming. No-one had heard him coming. He was just...there.

Standing there, talking to them, calling them by name, saying – coyly, risen tongue in risen cheek, as though butter wouldn't melt in his mouth – “Well, hello there! Don't be frightened. Anyone would think you'd seen a ghost.”

Well, Jesus, let's review: the door didn't open, the wall didn't come down, and yet here you are. This sort of thing does not happen every day, or any day. If you're trying to make us feel safe, trying to share that peace you keep on about, maybe use the door next time. Otherwise, some of us might start believing in ghost stories.

That was one of the rules I set down for myself, long ago, when I felt the tap, tap on the shoulder of the call to the priesthood: No ghost stories. Don't make me say that I believe in things that cannot exist or could never have happened. If that is the price of service, find others to serve. Fools, after all, rush in. Believing in hope is hard enough. Having faith that love can triumph over hate and indifference is tough enough. Trusting that mercy endures and compassion makes a difference is no easy feat. Nor is believing that we can all be better than we are and that the moral arc of the universe bends toward justice, or at least can be so bent. Each of these requires faith, more sometimes than I can muster. Don't add to this those stories about dead people walking, chariots of fire spiriting prophets to the sky, virgin maids giving birth to baby boys in barns, or water turned into wine because someone told it to. No myths that can't remember that they're myths. No impossibilities. No ghost stories. Don't expect me to believe in ghost stories.

Unless, of course, it turns out I'm actually in one.

Which is what they said as well.

Jesus's disciples, that is.

Don't make us believe in ghost stories, Jesus. What's going on?

"Peace be with you," he said. It didn't help.

Nothing he said helped. So he asked them for food.

A ghost wouldn't do that.

Right?

Right? So they gave him some fish: broiled, not stirred. Which figures. Jesus left after a good, hearty meal. It makes sense he'd show back up expecting another. I mean, he told them to eat and drink and remember him whenever they gathered. Here you all are - so it must be about me, he'd be within his rights to think. So, let me have some - which they did. If he eats it, then he must be -

Best start believing...

...there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy.

You better believe it; we're in one.

A ghost story - or a not-ghost story. Which is it? I've often wondered why this meal, not the Last Supper, didn't become the central rite of the Christian church. Why was it the last meal he shared before his betrayal and murder that became the place people sent to ritually meet him? Why not a re-enactment of a post-Easter gathering? Instead of "On the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus Christ took bread" we'd say, "At the noon of the day of his return, our Risen Lord took fish," blessed it, broke it, and gave it to his friends, saying, "Take, eat. This is my body, re-born for you. Whenever you eat it, do this in memory of the me." We'd all have to share sardines or something *in lieu* of cardboard wafers, but that's a detail. White wine instead of red, too, much to every Altar Guild's delight. "He came to us from beyond the grave," we'd pray. "He ate with us, and drank. He gave us peace."

My sons, in reviewing a draft of this sermon, suggested splitting the difference and turning into the Body of Christ this morning little Goldfish Crackers™.

The thought has crossed my mind.

It's well within the rubrics.

It's been done before. I've seen it.

Maybe one day.

But fish-communion was not to be – so back to our ghost or not-ghost story, which is it? That depends on what “it” is all about. What is “it” all about? Why the Messiah had to suffer and die and then rise in order to...overcome what ails us, fix what we and God did wrong. It was not to make people believe impossibilities, or rely on authorities that make them believe absurdities and then commit atrocities. That may have been what happened, but it wasn't what was supposed to have happened. Jesus and his followers were trying to get people away from that sort of thing. everyone else out of. All that he did was in order that, as the Gospel of Luke tells us this morning: “repentance and forgiveness of sins...be proclaimed to all nations.”

That is – if you repent and accept that you are forgiven, you can go forth and sin no more. You really can – because this time, the one who said that you could and that this was true didn't stay dead, even though they killed him. John the Baptizer, who said much the same thing, stayed dead. So did Marley, in *A Christmas Carol*, as dead as a door knocker. Dead, dead. Dead for good. But Jesus was not, not any longer.

He was, that is, alive. Differently than before his death, but really there. Eating fish, relieving anxiety, granting peace, and inspiring change. Whatever it means, whatever the ghost part means, the moral of the story is that it worked. Forgiveness, that is. Laughter after mourning. Spring after winter. Easter after Good Friday. Healing after loss. Good over evil. Hope again alive – which is no ghost story, but the story we live in. Death has

not the last word. Peace can be with us – and living as though it is true can make it come true. We can be, as 1st John says, purified – like rain or the dew. Pure.

Undefined. Incorruptible. Changed.

He calls us “children of God,” which is miracle enough for a hundred lifetimes, yet even that is not the end, not the last word. Something more remains:

As 1st John writes, “What we will be has not yet been revealed.”

Turns out there’s more to this not-ghost story. What will be? Freedom. We can live fulfilled, hopeful, and beautiful lives. We are meant to. We’ve always been meant to. Now we can – if we choose to. Jesus, came back better than he had been in order to show us that we all can be better than we are, and would be happier if we were. We don’t know, quite, all that that will mean, or what it will look like or be or entail. It has not yet been revealed. But we see it in him, in Jesus, in the stories that came down. Walls were not barriers to him, nor closed doors. He came to bring peace. He was no ghost, and this is still no ghost story.

We best start believing in not-ghost stories, then; we’re in one. *Amen.*