

Sunday, April 22, 2012 (Luke 24:36b-48)

The appearance of a ghost can be explained in all sorts of ways. But when Jesus appears—bearing scars and hungry for a nice piece of tilapia—then we have to do more than merely rearrange some intellectual furniture.

by [Wm. Michael Jenkins](#) in the [April 18, 2012](#) issue

It was the spring of 1988. We had rounded the corner of the liturgical year again, and although I'd preached Easter sermons many times, I was feeling relieved that I was not preaching the Easter service that year. Senior minister Thomas Allsop would preach to the throngs of parishioners and visitors at historic Beechgrove Church of Aberdeen, Scotland. As pastoral assistant, my duty would be to read the scripture text and to pray on the "high holy days."

I was glad, because in the spring of 1988 I was living through a season of profound doubt.

I remember one Sunday afternoon after worship services when I walked into our house down the road from the church, took my clerical dog collar off, tossed it on the table and said to my wife Deborah: "You know, I don't think I believe anything at all." At the core of my unbelief was the resurrection.

I had prayed and thought long and hard about all of this, but to no avail. Friends had counseled me, but doubt persisted. I was working toward a Ph.D. in systematic theology at the university. My doubt was unimpressed by my research.

Easter arrived, and I did my duty, unbelieving. After I read the Gospel text, Tom climbed the steps up into the pulpit and said something that utterly surprised me. I felt as if he was reading my mind when he remarked, almost offhandedly, at the opening of his sermon: "You know, the disciples couldn't believe it either."

I can still remember the soft Glaswegian lilt of Tom's voice. He paused a long time before continuing with a sermon that became the word of God to me that day and marked the moment when I started my long pilgrimage back to faith.

Tom located me (and, I suspect, many others in that congregation) right beside the earliest followers of Jesus. He noticed what the Gospel writers did not fail to notice but what we often miss: the first followers of Jesus (as Mark observed) were seized with terror and amazement and (as Luke tells us in this story of the appearance of the risen Christ) were "startled and terrified."

It is appropriate (I am tempted to say it's more appropriate today than ever, though I doubt this is true) that belief issues forth from doubt. At the very least, belief and doubt are not opposites. They are intimately related responses in those who are actually paying attention to the amazing acts of God among us.

This is particularly relevant to the passage in Luke's Gospel.

"Touch me and see," Jesus said to the disciples, "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?'"

Seeing a ghost in a dark corridor might require some shifting in our conventional thinking. The appearance of a specter, although surprising, can be explained in all sorts of ways. But when Jesus appears, bodily risen, bearing the scars of his crucifixion, hungry for a nice piece of broiled tilapia, then we have to do more than merely rearrange some intellectual furniture. We have to move into a whole new mental and spiritual dwelling place—and the first disciples were as unprepared as we are to make this transition.

There's a line in my favorite play, *The Lion in Winter*, in which Eleanor of Aquitaine, wife of King Henry II of England, says, "In a world where carpenters get resurrected, anything is possible."

That's the message that meets us on Easter. Anything is possible. The first disciples did not fail to grasp this fact. If Jesus is raised from the dead, we have to rethink everything we ever thought we knew about what's possible.

At least the first disciples did finally grasp this fact after Jesus met them in flesh and blood, and through the power of his presence among them "opened their minds to understand the scriptures." It was only in his presence that their minds were prepared to be opened. Then they understood "everything written" about the Christ "in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms." Then and only then did the tumblers fall into place. The Messiah had to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day. Then and only then did they realize the significance of the fact that "repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem" and that they were the witnesses of all these things, witnesses sent by Christ because they had been in his presence.

It was a long time after that Easter in 1988 that I told Tom what his sermon had meant to me. I suppose it took a while for me to risk his knowing that his assistant had not believed in the resurrection on that Easter morning.

But I need not have worried. Tom preached the sermon out of his own honest struggles with doubt and belief. He understood that witnesses to the good news of the gospel, if they are trustworthy witnesses, bear in themselves the tracks of their own pilgrimage of faith, a faith that more often than not involves some terror and some surprise, some disbelieving and some wonder—much like the faith of the first disciples.