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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Third Sunday of Easter
April 18, 2021

Lectionary Year B: Luke 24:36b-48

Two out of my three years in graduate school at the University of North Dakota were spent at the "old" School of Medicine and Health Sciences, which was actually the repurposed St. Michael's Hospital on Columbia Road in Grand Forks. Back when it was a hospital, the psychiatric ward was on fifth floor and the morgue was in the basement, and believers in the paranormal liked to speculate that, because of the distressed souls still lingering (particularly in those locations), strange things have been observed in the building. Now, do you think that I would believe that I was studying in a haunted place?

Naturally, I'm a skeptic, and I regard the thought of a haunted old hospital as something creepy that gets everybody going. That is all.

Incidentally, the School of Medicine and Health Sciences moved in 2016 to its brand new, shiny building at the corner of Columbia Road and Gateway Drive, and, as far as I know, it wasn't built on top of some ancient burial grounds or anything like that...

The "old" medical school still had some of those "bump in the night" kinds of occurrences that could give one pause, however. I can attest to this. One evening, when I was studying late, I heard what sounded like a gunshot. As I was sitting at the com-

puter in our department headquarters, I looked to my left and there a floor-to-ceiling piece of plate glass had shattered into a million pieces!

I'm there by myself and wondering how on earth that happened. I found a janitor in the hallway who was working late at night; I summoned him and asked, "Could you please come in here and take a look at this?" He sees what had happened and says, in his heavily-accented English, "I call my supervisor." So then his supervisor comes along twenty minutes later, and I'm interviewed not only by him but also by an officer from the UND campus police. They tried to figure out what had happened...and wanted my entire story. It's after midnight by this time, I'm still there, and no one (including me, the only witness) knew exactly what had caused this huge piece of glass to shatter.

As I suggested earlier, I don't have much time for far-out theories of paranormal activity, or for ghosts and all of those sorts of things. Spontaneous shattering of glass is something that can happen without the help of a creature from beyond the grave. And, that night and afterward, I didn't think so much about why it happened, and was merely struck by the fact that it did happen. Later, as one would expect, all the glass had to be cleaned up, and we in that department sat there looking at a piece of painted plywood for about a month until the university finally replaced it!

Nonetheless, when we jump to conclusions, we aren't necessarily jumping to the right thing. And when you think about people who

assumed that ghosts were responsible for the shattered glass (yes, there were a few), you might also think about all the other things that could've been at work. Any number of phenomena, including changes in the pressure and temperature of the building, can make strange things like that happen, too.

We find that people jump to conclusions, though, not so much out of fact but out of uncertainty, because they simply don't know, and they struggle to find explanations for things. Looking at this morning's Gospel text, we have a very vivid example of something like that. Here, it states, "Jesus himself stood among [the disciples] and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost" (Luke 24:36b-37).

They thought they were seeing a ghost. Did ghosts, in a similar vein, really shatter that glass at UND, too? I don't think so.

Now look at what this example brings to us here. Jesus came into the disciples' midst, and they didn't know what was going on...not the first time that's ever happened! Among the many conclusions that they came to was that they were seeing an apparition. Well, as it turns out, they weren't. Jesus tells them, "Look...touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have" (Luke 24:39).

And then there's the real clincher. Would a ghost get hungry? Would a ghost ask for a piece of fish and eat it? No! This was

the real Crucified and Risen One in the presence of the disciples. Pretty wild stuff, when you think about it. Remember, too, that the first Easter was not an occasion of great rejoicing and merriment upon the discovery of the empty tomb and in various encounters between the Risen Christ and the disciples. Instead, it was a time of fear, doubt, questioning, and trepidation. Who is accustomed to seeing resurrections regularly? No one. Understandably, the disciples were afraid and terrified.

As you likely know, I love Easter and maintain with countless divines from years and centuries past that Easter is the greatest festival on the Christian calendar; it is right, as well, to celebrate Easter not just as one day but as fifty days from Easter Sunday to Pentecost. And obviously, it makes sense for us to celebrate these days with great joy, but perhaps we need to remember the response that the disciples themselves had when they first encountered the resurrected Christ, too. They were afraid. They were terrified. Doubt and fear filled their hearts. And only with a little bit of removal from that initial terror and fear did they come to rejoice and proclaim the good news. The Risen Christ himself had a hand in this, too, as our Gospel recalls that "he opened their minds to understand the scriptures" (Luke 24:45). Just as history cannot be interpreted the moment it happens, so too must the disciples gain perspective of and have their minds opened to what they have witnessed.

That said, I would encourage us to think about the ways in which

Easter is an occasion not just for joy but also for wonder, so that we could have that same sense of mystery and awe that the first witnesses of the resurrection had. That is a big part of what it means to be Easter people...that we may, yes, celebrate with joy the resurrection, but also have that sense of mystery and awe that comes with the contemplation of what happened on the first Easter.

We can't know for sure what it looked like, but we know, in faith, that it was real, that it was awe-inspiring, and that it stirred a bit of terror in people's hearts. But yet, it pointed the way to eternal life for all of God's children.

Sometimes, we might be led to spurious conclusions about one thing or another, like those who thought ghosts were the culprit in the mysteriously shattering glass at the University of North Dakota, or like the disciples who thought that Jesus himself was a ghost. But then we can also think about things in light of what's real. We can think about what the resurrection means in light of not only what the disciples saw and witnessed to, but also what we believe to be real, which is that Christ is raised from the dead -- as a real person, not a ghost -- and that we will have eternal life because of him.

Fittingly, we close with Jesus' words, "You are witnesses of these things" (Luke 24:48). We, like the disciples, bear both this wondrous good news and an awesome responsibility to proclaim it truthfully. Think of what it's like to see something inexplicable

and then to share your story with the UND campus police. Don't jump to conclusions or see things that aren't there...just announce that Christ is risen and tell of what his resurrection means for us.

Amen.