

The Rev. Mieke Vandersall
Astoria Presbyterian Church
Luke 24: 13-35
April 30, 2006

I wasn't a child to be afraid of ghosts. I didn't believe in them. But I did know monsters lived in my closet. It was just at night when it was really dark and quiet and no one was upstairs and I was sent to bed by myself. I would tiptoe up the stairs as fast and quietly as I could, as stealthily as possible so that no monsters could hear me coming to plan their attack on me. Once I reached the top of the steps, with a few more feet to go I would run into my room, jump under the covers, quickly burrowing my little body, wrapping my sheets all around me, quite aware that my closet was a little bit too close for comfort. And in my closet were not only my clothes but old family secrets and archives, old pictures and my mother's wedding dress that I would spend countless hours during the day exploring. That closet at night though, that is where the monsters lived, because it was even darker and quieter and much colder in there than in my room. But the rule I created was that if my covers were over my head, even though I couldn't breathe very well that way, the monsters wouldn't find me, couldn't touch me or tell that I existed. The covers were a protective shield preventing them from recognizing the lump of a child that was underneath.

We tell children that if they are afraid of ghosts, or monsters, when we recognize them, when we talk back to them, they disappear. There is really no need to be afraid of them, no matter how real and scary they are to the child that believes in them, we say.

And indeed it would do adults some good if we listened to our own advice to confront the ghosts and monsters and skeletons that live in our adult physical and metaphorical closets. If we were to recognize them, sit them down to have a chat, name them for what they are, then perhaps they wouldn't need to create so much fear and trembling, ruling our sleeping and our living.

On face value, if we hadn't heard our biblical story this morning so many times before and if we weren't numb to its telling, we may think that Jesus is ghostlike. He is a curious Teacher for us to believe in, to put our faith in, for he appears to be playing a disappearing act. He is crucified, dead, and buried. The women came to the tomb with spices, but the body was gone! He had disappeared! Two men in dazzling, sparkling, clothing covered in sequins and glitter assured them that Jesus has risen, he is among the living!

A few days later the word had spread, the rumor of these dazzling angels having seen this risen Christ, this reappearing Jesus. Two disciples were on their way to Emmaus, either 7 or 17 miles away from where he had been laid, depending on who you talk to, trying to make sense of this tragedy and miracle, trying to make sense of what this all may mean in their lives, all laws of logic having been turned upside down, all of their stereotypes and presuppositions challenged. He had risen, somewhere between 7 and 17 miles away from them, more than the entire length of Manhattan, so they certainly didn't expect to see him right there along the dusty road, and if they did, he would have to be a ghost.

And then somewhere along their trip, a stranger, just a guy walking down the road, on his way to Emmaus, he caught up to them. And they told him how confused they were, how much hope they had in Jesus of Nazareth, how they thought they had finally found their Redeemer and how he was turned over and crucified. And what were they to do now, especially with news from the women that he had risen somehow? How could they make sense of any of this? And then, somehow the stranger knowing their entire story and the story of the Risen One even better than they did, in pretty harsh words retold them their story. But the truth of the story, this time, that this was all to happen, that they were on God's time, not their own, he challenged them, yet again, to make sense of all that had transpired. And their hearts were burning. And when he was done teaching them, telling them everything they needed to know, giving them all the tools in his toolbox, he was ready to move on.

But, not knowing who he was, they begged him not to go, the two must have grown attached to this teacher that they shared this walk with, as they had grown attached to their previous one. And they already had enough abandonment, they weren't ready for him to disappear too. They had found a new teacher and didn't know it was the same one they had before. And so he stayed and broke bread and they realized who it was, that he was the same. Jesus of Nazareth. And then he vanished, once recognized, once acknowledged, he disappeared.

And perhaps then their business in Emmaus was over, and, since they walked a lot those days, they went back to Jerusalem, putting 7 or 17 more miles on their pedometer, spreading the news that indeed the women had been right. While they didn't usually believe women, this time they must, he had risen and appeared and disappeared again. If we read on we hear that he appeared to the disciples yet one more time, trying to make sense of this, they believed that this was him, he taught them again, gave them peace, ate with them, and then he vanished, going up to heaven.

The disciples, they even mistook Jesus as a ghost. And so in their lack of belief he showed them him flesh and his heart, in their confusion he showed them his hands and his feet.

Sometimes what we think is God's presence with us, what we think is Jesus walking beside us, is actually a ghost. Sometimes we mis-take God in our lives as the disciples mis-took Jesus. How often it is our inclination to look towards outside things to know God is with us. To count our blessings of material wealth for evidence of God's faithfulness, to give thanks for our health as a sign of God's promises, to celebrate our family and friends to assure ourselves that God has not abandoned us. Indeed we may experience God through the many external, concrete and physical ways that we could list or gather around us like we were getting ready for a stoop sale or for the auctioneers to come in and give minimum bids on our lives.

But then, while we still may be very blessed, the reality of our lives sets in and we begin to think like the disciples that Jesus is no more than a ghost. Your brother finds out he has two weeks to live and there is so much to resolve in such a short period of time. Or your beloved begins to question her love and commitment for you, and you put two and two together when she has been coming home too late too many nights in a row. Or your apartment that you have lived in for 35 years is going to be sold by the developers who look forward to tripling your rent. Or you have been trying to become pregnant for months and months and your pregnancy test comes back negative for the 82nd time in a row and you wonder what you are doing wrong and why God isn't giving you this one thing that you want more than anything in the world. And then all those things, those areas that you have clung to in assurance of God's presence begin to erode, and you begin to wonder if God really is a ghost, because when you need to feel God's arms around you, God doesn't seem to show up. And so you name God and God doesn't appear to be there.

And then there are these times that you don't think God really is there at all and only in looking back can you see the ways in which God was present, moving, blowing, walking right alongside. Those times when God is as good as a ghost and our doubt takes over, our lack of trust takes over that God may be doing anything new and fresh within you.

It is tempting to think that when we profess Christianity, God we will save us from the pain of the world, from the moments when we only feel God as a ghostly presence, at best. If only the Christian journey was one of instant conversion, of seeing or feeling God once and for all and accepting Jesus in your heart and then being promised you will never feel alone or depressed or grief-stricken or confused again. How easy that would be.

But it is more like the cycle of feeling and seeing God's presence and then using those times when you were so sure of God's presence to remind you of this comfort when you have no physical evidence whatsoever. Kathleen Norris writes in her book, *Dakota; A Spiritual Geography*, "Conversion means starting with who we are, not who we wish we were. Conversion

doesn't offer a form of knowledge that can be quantified, or neatly packaged. It is best learned slowly and in community."

Slowly. Several months ago on a radio program I was listening to a woman whose name is Esther Sternberg, a doctor who focuses on our brain's responses to stress and how this affects our health and wellness. Through experiences, whether negative or positive, our brains learn how to respond to situations of stress in our lives. And often that response affects our immune system, being a cause of various forms of sickness. We can reprogram our brains once we become aware of how we respond to certain situations, by understanding why we respond in particular ways and then practicing new ways of response. But this is hard, hard work. By replacing old ways of responding with new ways we are shedding behaviors that may be destructive but have comforted us and maybe even protected us for many years. She noted that it takes us about 50 times of falling down to learn how to ride a bicycle. And then we reach the aha moment and we get it. So we have to replace these old behaviors with new ones at least 50 times for them to stick.

And so it is on the journey.

We can think of Jesus as giving us teachings and examples to help us understand how we may respond differently to situations in our lives. He gives us alternatives to violence through peacemaking. He gives us options on how we are to engage with our enemies. He shows us how we may meet injustice with challenge and a loving heart. He shows us how we may treat those we dislike without intentionally hurting them any farther. He tells us that the material things we hang on to will not save us in the end, but will keep us from living fully. He demonstrates that we cannot control our lives or anyone else's, and freedom comes from not trying. He teaches us not to hate any of God's children, even though the society we live in may encourage this.

And all of these teachings and ways of life that lead to our freedom have to be practiced, probably more than 50 times, for our body to get how to engage in them as second nature. Slowly we have to practice over and over and over again to be able to recognize God, within us and around us, to know when Jesus is walking right beside us and telling us the story of our lives.

On the road to Emmaus two of Jesus' followers listened to their story, to his story, perhaps for the 50th time. For Jesus had taught so many times before through illustrations, parables, miracles, lessons, he had taught in the flesh and told them how the scriptures were to be lived out and yet still what he had taught was so different from what they must have learned before, was so very contrary to who they were supposed to be according to the world in which they lived that even with Jesus physically present they could not make sense of it.

And so, mistaking Jesus as a stranger they were taught again, and then mistaking Jesus as a ghost they received their illustrations, and they still needed more time, more attention, more practice to be able to tell themselves their own story, to be able to understand how they were to be community.

Welcome to the Easter journey, my dear friends. A journey of practicing, slowly, intentionally how we may follow our Teacher, how we may respond to the coldness and the loneliness of the world with the promise of life conquering death. It is a journey of stripping ourselves bare of the many vices that hold us hostage to be able to recognize Christ in our midst.

Amen.