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Newark, Delaware

Psalm 4
Luke 24:36-49

“Repent-Receive Forgiveness-Go”

Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.”

Jesus’ dear friends were startled and terrified, and thought they were seeing a ghost.

And you? Are you startled? Terrified?

I know people who claim they have seen a ghost, but I’ve never seen one. I had a ghost mask some years ago that I paired with an old sheet, and come Halloween or a masquerade party I felt quite authentic. The mask was rubberized and covered my entire head. I scared quite a few people (though I doubt they were terrified) ... but I stored it in the attic one summer, it semi-melted and all stuck together. Pat said, “Good riddance.”

When I was a child, I went back and forth at the prospect of seeing a ghost. I was kind of intrigued ... wanting to see one. But as I grew older, I became more and more skeptical about ghosts. We visited Gettysburg and come night-time they have Ghost walks all over town. Now, I just don’t get it.

And it seems that ghosts are somewhat passé these days anyway. Now, there are vampires and Zombies.

Certainly such twenty-first century reflections were far from the minds of the disciples when they encountered the resurrected Jesus, and mistook him for a ghost. And we are going to have to work at it a little bit this morning to begin to understand...and to move along to believing ... to trusting, not in ghosts, but in this resurrected Jesus.

Which is, I suppose, the way it should be. The disciples had to work at it. Time and time again in the gospel stories Jesus’ disciples just don’t get it, or at best they are slow to catch on and understand. Such is the case in today’s story, a story that deals with some pretty heavy theological, that is, God-in-action stuff.

In the first place, just two weeks after Easter we are still trying to make sense of the whole *resurrection* thing, just as the disciples were doing in those days immediately following the first Easter. That particular story I read in Luke is at pains to prove that Jesus' resurrected body was just that: an actual body and not just a vision or a spirit. Certainly it was not a ghost. "Look, touch me" ... "eat with me." By inviting his close friends to touch him and then by eating with them, Jesus gives the disciples proof of his physical resurrection and tries to calm their fears.

And to stimulate hope.

But why does this matter? Why is it so important that Jesus' resurrected body is fully recognizable? ... Awesomely familiar?

The physics and mechanics of resurrection aren't really the main point here. What's most important here is the *theological* – the God in action/God abiding claim that salvation is not about disembodied souls that go off to heaven after their bodies die. The good news of salvation we discover in Jesus is very much about the real, material world that we live in.

It is about this physical place we call our home.

It is about flesh-and-blood human beings,
people who hunger and thirst and feel
pain.

And also, people who hunger and thirst for enduring
meaning, and timeless significance.

It has been a long-standing temptation for the church, and for church people, to focus on otherworldly matters and so disregard the realities of the world in which we live. From ancient times to the present, some Christians are so focused on spiritual things that the material world is viewed as nothing more than a temporary holding place until we arrive at the "real" world beyond. But that's wrong.

That way of thinking ignores the goodness of God's creation.

That way of thinking denies the truth that God created us
as whole beings—body *and* soul.

The biblical doctrines of Jesus' incarnation/that is, his birth in a specific town in Judea, visited by shepherds and magi from afar, and being caught in the cross-fire between competing religious

factions and hated Roman authority, and his grisly death on a cross and the resurrection of his body ... All that grounds the gospel in the material world. In the realm of touch, sight and smell. When God is revealed to us in the person of Jesus, it is precisely as flesh and blood. When the crucified Jesus is transformed from death to life that too is as flesh and blood.

Friends, I have no idea who invented Earth Week, and Earth Day and set the dates as they did ... perhaps some passionate environmentalists. But I can understand people of faith of a wide variety of persuasions joining to celebrate Earth Day, or Week, Or Sunday ... Or whatever.

Earth Day theology offers ... and affirms an understanding of God and God's ways that we can sink our teeth into. Salvation is not about *escape from* this world. Salvation is about the *redemption of* this world. The whole world. Our Father's world. That is what God is calling us to celebrate and to be a part of.,,with our whole heart, soul, strength and mind.

But this resurrection account from Luke doesn't stop there. After Jesus shows his disciples that he is still flesh and blood—like them, yet also profoundly different—he goes on to lead them in one last Bible study. In Luke's story, according to Jesus' interpretation of the Old Testament, these things that have happened to him were ordained by God, written into the prophecies of ancient Israel, and made clear through his life, death, and resurrection.

Then Jesus goes one step further: it is not enough to just understand these things—a challenge in and of itself, to be sure—but we are also called by God to proclaim the good news of repentance and forgiveness of sins.

It strikes me as remarkably significant that these are essentially Jesus' last words in the Gospel of Luke. "Go out and proclaim repentance and the forgiveness of sins."

I don't talk about repentance all that much. For Presbyterians, repentance is not all that central. We're more about accepting God's amazing grace and forgiveness, and living faithfully, passing grace along to others, and we're not so big on

repentance. Yet this is the very thing that Jesus specifically tells us to go out and proclaim.

No doubt our aversion to preaching and hearing repentance comes from our negative reactions to those Bible-thumping fire-and-brimstone preachers out there who give Christianity a bad name.

But that's not what this is about. Far from it. Proclaiming repentance is about recognizing the pervasive power of sin in the world and the reality that each and every one of us is implicated in that sin.

Sin is anything that runs counter to the way of God.

God's way for living is harmony. Sin is discord.

God's way for living is peace. Sin is conflict.

God's way for living is unity. Sin is going off on our own way.

Through the study of scripture and the discernment of how the Spirit is moving in the world today, we have a pretty good idea what God's way is. Proclaiming repentance is about reminding ourselves that we are not always following that way and about making a course correction to get back on track.

I'm always startled by the question when inquirers profess their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord, **"Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?"**

That is what repentance is all about. Repentance is about recognizing the presence and power of sin in the world, turning away from that, and turning toward God. Yet even more than simply turning toward the way of God, repentance is actually walking down that difficult path along with Jesus.

Forgiveness is easy. Repentance is hard. It's easy to come in to church and to seek forgiveness. It is easy to confess our sins. The hard part is doing something about it. Yet that is what God is calling us to do. When we seek God's forgiveness, our burdens are lifted, our guilt is washed away, but we still have responsibility. What God is looking for in our lives is

transformation. That is the way we participate in the redemption of the world. The resurrected Christ illustrates the truth that redemption is possible.

Christ's call to repentance is the way we get there.

It's not hard to see the possibilities and opportunities for this kind of redeeming repentance in our world. Just look at the economic crisis we have been slogging through these past 7 years. While there is certainly plenty of finger-pointing and scapegoating that continues in our political theater, there's little question about what got us where we are: unbridled greed on all levels. Now that there has been some public recognition of this, the question is, what happens now? Do we have the discipline and courage to actually change our ways? Change, personally and as a nation?

Further, today ... and through this week, as we think of the Earth, what are we really willing to change about the ways we live our lives? Of what value is our belief in God's good creation if we won't take action to participate in the repair and restoration of God's world?

Confession is easy. True repentance is difficult. Are we willing to sacrifice something from our lives, for the greater good?

But Earth Sunday and Earth Week – and if it were so, Earth Year ... that is only the tip of this melting iceberg. Look anywhere around you and you know that we live in a world in need of redemption/in need of heart-felt transformation.

Look in your own heart and you know that you're in need of redemption too, just like me, just like every one of us. We don't need a red-faced preacher to tell us that. Today Jesus teaches us that the way to heart-felt transformation is true repentance. And taking-up, yet again and more firmly the way of Christ.

“Thus it is written,” Jesus says, “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 to these things.”

And so we are. Amen.