

## **"What Does 'Risen' Really Mean?"**

Homily of April 24, 2004

by Father Brian Joyce

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They believed in ghosts. That's true. They believed in ghosts. The apostles, the disciples and the large numbers who experienced and recognized the Risen Lord Jesus, they believed in ghosts. That's the truth. Now, we don't believe in ghosts, although I am not going to ask for a show of hands, just in case we are divided fifty-fifty. But let me say, we don't believe in ghosts, but we know what ghosts are like. Maybe some of us remember Rex Harrison in "The Ghost and Mrs. Muir." He was the sea captain who kept coming back. Or we remember Patrick Swayze who kept hanging around and communicating with Demi Moore and Whoopie Goldberg in the movie, "The Ghost."

So we know what ghosts are like. First thing about ghosts is they are dead. Remember in "The Sixth Sense," a little voice saying, "I see dead people." and Tiger Wood repeats it in a commercial now, "I see dead people." The first thing about ghosts is they are dead. The second is we always recognize them. We kind of know who it is and they can't really come back. They are still trapped by death, even though they hang around for a limited time and for one reason or another.

Now, we don't believe in ghosts. But the apostles, the disciples, did. We know that because Jesus had to tell them, "Hey! I'm not a ghost. This is something different. This is totally and completely different. I am not a ghost!" They believed in ghosts. They also believed in people coming back from death. We might call them "near-death experiences" or "recovering by cpr." But they had experienced and seen people come back from death. There was the little girl that Jesus described as "sleeping," that he raised up from death. There was the young man who was being carried to be buried in the town of Naim, the son of a widow, probably being buried the very same day that he died, which was the custom, and Jesus brought him back from death. And, of course, there was Lazarus who was dead and buried for four whole days. So they believed in coming back from the dead.

But that is not what they experienced in Jesus. They did not experience Jesus coming back from the dead for a second chance. The experience of Jesus was completely different, first of all, because even though these were friends of Jesus who knew him up close and personal, in most cases they didn't recognize him. They recognized Lazarus. They recognized the little girl. They recognized the young man in Naim. But they didn't recognize who this was at first. And he didn't pick up his life where he had left off, which the others obviously did. And he didn't resume his career and then die at a ripe old age. This resurrection thing was totally different from ghost stories and totally different from coming back a second time, getting a second chance

at life. What we believe is that God raised Jesus up, (That's what the Bible says.) and that he was met and experienced and encountered as risen and as alive. Now, the Church has believed this and celebrated it for two thousand years.

It seems to me that there are four basic things about what we believe and celebrate that go back to the beginning and have continued all along. The first thing is the insistence of the early Church and the early disciples and the four gospels that the tomb was empty. The second thing, the personal experience that this Jesus the Lord is alive, experienced not just by the twelve disciples. That scene today is a miserably one, at the Sea of Galilee. There were six. We are told there were hundreds upon hundreds who finally experienced him. And then, that he can be encountered still (And this is what is so new!) in different ways, that this Jesus can be encountered in a community of faith, can be encountered when we hear his story in words, can be encountered in the poor, and most of all, can be encountered in Communion, in the Eucharist. And the fourth thing, and the most telling, that this is not just someone back from the dead, but that a whole new age has begun, not just for him, but for us. It affects us all. It affects the course of history. It affects the direction of the universe.

There is a prayer that I say later in the Mass. It is one of the Prefaces for the Easter Season. It says, "In Jesus, a new age has dawned. The long reign of sin is ended. A broken world has been renewed. And we are once again made whole." That's a good description of what the Resurrection of Jesus means, although whoever wrote it, sounds like he is very much out of touch with reality or hasn't read a newspaper in the last century, or never watches the news. "The long reign of sin has ended." ... Has it? "The broken world has been renewed." ... Has it? "And we are once again made whole." ... Are we?

We've got to be careful here, or we end up praying and celebrating and talking something that is really like make-believe, or like "Let's pretend."

What has helped me most, and it was really written first by C.S. Lewis, is the metaphor from the Second World War, the metaphor that most of Europe was occupied by Nazi forces, and yet, when Normandy was taken and when the Battle of the Bulge was won by the Allied Forces, everyone knew it was over. They still were in occupied territory. They still had to deal with occupying forces, but they knew it was over. A broken world already was made whole. Another story, of a prisoner of war camp in Singapore: the troops there, held in a Japanese prisoner of war camp, found out through a hidden short-wave radio that the Japanese war effort had collapsed. They were still in prison. They were still getting the same non-meals every day. They were still prisoners, but they were rejoicing and celebrating because they knew it was over.

That is what we mean by the Resurrection. By the Resurrection of Jesus, we know that there are still battles to be fought every day, but the war is won and victory is assured. And, in Jesus, a new direction and a new course has been set for humanity and for the story of the Universe. And we are called to be part of that. No ghost story. No resuscitated body. Not back to business as

usual. What happens is we encounter God in the person of Jesus Christ. And we encounter the person of Jesus Christ, not a ghost, not a recovered body, but risen and alive. And we encounter Jesus Christ in the community of believers, in the poor, in his word, and especially in the Eucharist, in Communion.

Why do we come together and why does Jesus come to us in Communion? I think it is to change us so that we can carry out the victory, so that we can change the world. We have a lot of First Communions these days. We have eighty-two First Communions this morning. We'll have another thirty or forty tomorrow; next weekend, another hundred or more. I don't know if any of you remember this, but long ago, when youngsters made their First Communions they would carry candles as they came in. The boys would carry candles and they had white bands on their arms. The girls would have long veils and candles. And I don't remember it, because I am too young. But there was a time when they carried lighted candles in. That got stopped by the fire patrol. And then we stopped carrying candles because carrying unlit candles doesn't say much. But, what it was supposed to say was, "We are called to be light. By Communion we are called to bring light to the world." You know what we did today with eighty-two of our youngsters? When they went up to gather on the altar, they brought food for the poor, not candles, but food for someone else.

We are nourished at the altar so that we can nourish others. Jesus gathers us, teaches us, and nourishes us so that we can nourish the world. May each of us find ways to do it well. Amen.