

Easter 3 Year B 2021
April 18, 2021

Alleluia! Christ is risen! **Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I've never really been a fan of horror movies or ghost stories. As a kid at camp and at sleepovers, ghost stories were quite common, and I had to find ways not to get too freaked out. But most of these stories, I realized, follow a similar pattern.

Most horror stories will follow this predictable pattern: A person dies a tragic or violent death, and quite often the victim is innocent and unsuspecting. There's an ancient prophecy about the dead returning, and the people who betrayed the victim, either directly or indirectly, are trying to protect themselves from ghostly wrath.

Now, we don't really think about it, but the stories of Jesus' resurrection have a lot of the hallmarks of those campfire ghost stories. It certainly fits with today's gospel reading from Luke. Jesus has been dead for three days, and the people who betrayed, denied, and abandoned him are hiding in a locked room. Already, there have been reports of the empty tomb, and that a dead man has been seen by a few people who managed to escape with their lives. In this horror story, the disciples are afraid Jesus has come back as a ghost to haunt them.

But there is no ghost, only their guilt. The disciples are haunted, but not by the spirit of the person they denied and abandoned. They are haunted by their own mistakes, their own guilt, their own brokenness. It is this same brokenness that makes it so the disciples cannot face Jesus, either alive as a resurrected Lord, or as a ghost there to torment them.

Maybe we know what it's like to be haunted by our past. It's a very human experience, to look back on our past mistakes and see ghosts. We can see, if not in our own lives, then usually in the lives of others, the way that our brokenness has caused regret. At times, some of us have keenly felt broken by our mistakes, by a disease, by a relationship, or maybe even by daily life. It's easy to agree with the disciples, and to try and hide in locked attics not only from the ghosts that haunt us, but from the brokenness in our lives and ourselves.

With all that in mind, I want to tell you of a man and his ghosts. There was once a man named Wes. Wes was a troubled child, some might say. He was in high school when he fell in with a group of friends who were regular drug users. He was still 17 when he got high and smashed mailboxes with a baseball bat while one of his friends drove down the street. Now, destruction of federal property is a federal crime, but Wes was lucky to be tried as a minor, and as it was his first real offense, he was put on probation. While on probation, he could ease the sentence by getting a job, so he did, at a local restaurant his next-door neighbor worked at. It was there that he met a fry cook only a few years older. The fry cook was a religious man, down to earth, caring and calming. The two became fast friends. Wes would go to the fry cook's apartment to play games with a group of people. The fry cook even helped Wes get to his probation meetings and was a reference when Wes tried to lower his time under probation. Wes' mother even noted that the fry cook was the best influence Wes had ever had. It even seemed for Wes like he would move up in the restaurant business.

But as his probation was ending, his old friends came calling. The past that the courts had helped keep away returned. Wes started to miss work, and would miss game nights with the fry cook and friends. Eventually old friends, who never went on probation or were never caught in their substance abuse, offered him harder drugs. Wes missed so many shifts because he was out with his old friends or still high or hung over, that he was fired from the restaurant. He stopped responding to the fry cook's phone calls. One day when his neighbor who got him the job told him the fry cook was asking about where he had gone and how he was doing, Wes felt ashamed.

He told his neighbor that he couldn't face the fry cook. He was certain that the fry cook and his friends would disown him for falling back into his old habits. Wes was haunted by his brokenness, and sure that his new friends couldn't accept him after his ghosts had gotten the better of him.

Not long after all this, Wes' cell phone rang, and it was the fry cook. Wes watched it ring and go to voicemail. At first, Wes was going to delete the message without listening to it. He expected to be chastised and chewed out by this church goer for the brokenness that had taken over his life once more. He expected he would be shamed like his parents shamed him, about his life and his choices. But the voicemail didn't start the way he expected it to. "Hey man," the voicemail started, "I heard you've been going through some stuff. I don't really know anything about it, but I wanted you to know I'm here for you if you need any help or anything. We've got a game night coming up on Friday, if you're around. But call me back, I haven't heard from you in a while and we all miss you here." Wes nearly dropped the phone. He wasn't expecting forgiveness, welcome, and acceptance in a voicemail. But even in the face of such grace, the brokenness in himself and the brokenness of our world convinced him that he didn't deserve the second chance the fry cook extended. It was that brokenness that stopped Wes from calling the fry cook back.

Sisters and brothers, this is the brokenness that haunts us. A brokenness that tells us that our mistakes are unforgivable, that all we can do is lock ourselves away from the ghosts of our past. It is a brokenness that pervades our world, that tells us our past mistakes are inescapable, and that people—ourselves included—deserve these cruel punishments from our ghosts.

But sisters and brothers, the gospel is not a ghost story, and Jesus is not a vengeful spirit. He is resurrected. Jesus, the living Lord, enters the locked room where the disciples hide and show them that he's not a ghost. He eats with them, as he did with the disciples who were on the road to Emmaus just hours before. He shows them his real wounds in his hands and feet just as he does for Thomas. Jesus enters the brokenness of their lives, and ends their haunting with words of forgiveness and assurance. Jesus heals their haunting with understanding and compassion. Jesus is not an angry God ready to punish us for our brokenness. Our resurrected Lord comes to mend and to forgive.

Christ comes to us when we are feeling unforgivable and unwanted, when we are haunted by our own brokenness. And there is a place where used, unwanted, and broken things tend to end up—a pawn shop. There's a pawn shop in Philadelphia I know about, full of unwanted, broken things. Each piece has a tag, listing not only the price, but also its past. A lamp without a shade, a hammer with a wobbly head, chipped mugs, incomplete dining sets, and CRT TVs; we all feel like we belong on those shelves sometimes. Now, this pawn shop has a stamp. Anytime it sells an item, this rubber stamp in red ink covers the tag. It doesn't say sold, or even purchased; the stamp reads, in big block letters, "REDEEMED".

Christ comes to us in our brokenness, in the locked rooms of our lives and redeems us. Redeems us, saves us from the ghosts of our past that haunt us. On the cross, Christ purchases us and we receive the same stamp over our own tags covering our price, our past and our brokenness; we are REDEEMED.

So then, we, like the disciples, are sent out: not as healers, or fixers, but as witnesses. To tell this broken world of ours that the ghosts that haunt them can be banished, that wholeness, healing, and redemption are possible. Because our God, though our crucified and risen Lord is already doing this for us, and we are redeemed. Thanks be to God, Amen.