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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: Luke 24: 1-12; 36-43
April 4, 2021: Easter Sunday

You are Not a Ghost

We've been waiting for you. We've been preparing for this moment for a while now, getting ready for your arrival. We had to figure out where everybody would go, where the musicians would stand, how they would be heard, and how it could all be recorded. There were a lot of technical details that had to take place, but one of the most important tasks, before any of that could even take place, happened last week. That's when folks came and cleaned up all the winter debris from the lawn – the dead leaves, the felled branches and sticks, the stray pieces of trash here and there. It was all done in expectation of your arrival.

In truth, I think an Easter sermon needs to begin in the same way. With a clearing of the ground, so that listeners can actually hear the Easter message. Because in truth, there's a lot of nonsense spoken about Easter in Christian churches. It's stuff that many of us absorbed as children. It's stuff that circulates in the media. It's stuff that gets spoken in public. It's debris cluttering the open spaces of Easter.

Things like this: the way churches have used Easter to stoke your guilt. "Christ died for your sins," is the line that's spoken. Or the way God has been depicted as angry, so angry that his beloved Son had to be killed. Or how Easter gets turned into a story helping to ensure your personal survival forevermore. Or the scapegoating and blame that have surrounded this story – the anti-Semitism it has provoked, to say nothing of the way it's been used as a cudgel against atheists, socialists, and liberals, all of whom bear responsibility for killing Jesus, according to some recent accounts. Or the literal interpretations that ask you to ignore science, to say nothing of your intellect. There's just so much debris that needs to be cleared, so many downed branches that need to be removed.

So let's rake the grounds of the dead leaves. Let's drag the sticks and fallen branches off to the side. Having done that, my hope is that we might become open to other ways of understanding this story, and other ways of celebrating this day. With the ground now good and clear, let me tell you what I do think is happening within this story, and what I think this day is about. If I could sum it up in five words, just five, my Easter message to all of you would be this: You are not a ghost.

Let me tell you what I mean by that. It all turns on the scene that unfolds on Easter evening, after Jesus has finally disclosed himself to his disciples. For about seven verses, the story revolves around the question of ghosts, and whether or not the story of Easter is a ghost story. The disciples think that Jesus must be a ghost, and they're scared out of their wits. Jesus, on the other hand, insists otherwise. He invites their touch. He tells them that ghosts do not have flesh and bones, as he has. And then, in what surely must be the most anti-climactic statement in all of the Bible, and maybe in all of literature, to cap off this argument about ghosts, he says, "Do you have anything to eat?" It's as if he had just walked in the door from a meeting that ran late rather

than getting out of a grave. And so the disciples prepare some fish for him. He eats it, and that apparently settles the matter, for ghosts, apparently, do not get hungry.

That exchange is, I believe, the hinge upon which the entire story about Jesus and his resurrection turns. But to get at the meaning of it all, we need to take a little time to think about ghosts, and what it means to say that Jesus is not a ghost. Which will, in turn, help us to think about what it means to say that *you* are not a ghost.

Let's think about a few other famous ghosts for just a minute. Take the ghost of Hamlet's father, who shows up on the walls of Elsinore Castle after his suspicious death. That particular ghost represents a memory that refuses to go away. It represents a violation that continues to outrage, a wound that refuses to heal. The ghost is a lingering trace of an event that cannot be resolved. Except to a select few, the ghost cannot be seen. Other than Hamlet himself, no one can hear what the ghost can say. It can neither touch nor be touched. It cannot move material objects, it cannot change anything, and it cannot directly affect anything, except through the will of another. The ghost, in other words, lacks any kind of formal agency in the world, which is its principal frustration. The best it can do is to haunt the life of another.

It's that question of agency, or its lack, that most clearly defines the nature of a ghost. From *Hamlet* to Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, from that Patrick Swayze movie from the 90's to the benign portrayal of ghosts on a lovely show on Netflix called *City of Ghosts*, the predicament that unites each of those spectral visitors is their inability to directly effect anything of consequence in the world. Oh, there are the slammed doors or the creaking floorboards, the dropped books or the glass suddenly shattered, all standard features of ghost stories. But those examples merely serve to emphasize the ghost's inability to fully impinge upon the world, to truly make a difference. That's what makes a ghost a ghost: the loss of agency.

Now, hang with me for just a little bit longer, because we're getting to the good part. If that's the case, if ghosts are figures for the loss of agency, then clearly a ghost is never just a ghost in a story. It's actually a profound symbol for all the ways human beings can be stripped of agency throughout their lives, made to haunt the periphery of events. Isn't that the deep meaning of that exchange about ghosts between Jesus and the disciples on Easter evening? It's the realization that what Jesus most truly is still has the power to shift and move things in the world – to heal the sick, to release the captives, to walk upon the waters of chaos, to restore what had been lost. It's the understanding that in Jesus, the disembodied and the disenfranchised, the dispossessed and the disappeared, all find their voices, all find their embodiment, all find their capacity to live again, all find their ability to assert themselves fully within the world. In Jesus, they, we, all of us, discover our agency once again. I am not a ghost, Jesus tells his disciples, and neither are you a ghost. Easter is not a ghost story. That Easter episode is Jesus helping the disciples discover themselves. It is Jesus saying: assert yourselves. Make yourselves known. Make this healing, vivifying, life enhancing power be known. Find your way out of the tomb you are in, for you are not a ghost.

We each of us stand in danger of becoming ghosts while we're alive. We become ghosts when we our voices go unheard. We become ghosts when people can no longer see us. We can be ghosts in our own homes, when the people in our family cease, really, to see or understand us.

That's when we begin to haunt our own houses. Or maybe we become ghosts at work, when our contributions cease to mean anything to anyone. Sometimes we become ghosts when we retire. We become ghosts when an economy leaves us behind. Some people are rendered ghosts when they get old, and are confined to long term care facilities. But kids can be ghosts too. How many high school kids walk through the halls of their schools certain that no one can see or hear them? How many grade school children feel unobserved at home and school alike, certain that no one cares? Kids especially stand in danger of becoming ghosts, for the full powers of language and expression aren't yet available to them. We all stand in danger of becoming ghosts – unseen, unheard, stripped of agency in other words.

Isn't that what the pandemic has been like for many of us? We've all receded from view. If we've seen each other at all, it's only as a spectral presence on a screen, or as vapory figures passing one another in the store. Even then, we're usually shrouded. It's been harder to have substantive interactions. We haven't been able to eat or drink with one another. The pandemic has transformed most of us, of necessity, into introverts, whether we're wired that way or not. And so we've begun to feel like ghosts even unto ourselves, shadowy, less than fully substantial, like Marty McFly in *Back to the Future*, when he starts to disappear from his family photo one limb at a time. For many of us, that ghostly quality has to do with a loss of agency. We exist, sure, but our capacity to move things in the world, to effect things, change things, do things, has been significantly curtailed. We have become as ghosts.

That's the resurrection we're being called to this year. And it's one of the reasons it feels so good to be together on Easter morning. This, right here, is us, coming out of our tomb. This, here, is us, declaring to one another, "You are not a ghost." This, here, is us, saying to one another, "You're here, you're substantial, you're real, you matter." This is us, saying to one another, "I see you. I hear you. And I love you." This, right here, is us, as individuals and as a community, affirming that we do have the power to push things, to shape and create things, to move things along. This is us, asserting that we are not passive observers of life, but are active participants within it. That's the resurrection we're called to this year. To celebrate Easter is to affirm our personal and communal agency in the world.

But this Easter message, that you are not a ghost, has a further implication that we need to grasp. I don't want it to go unnoticed that today is April the 4th. On this day 53 years ago, Martin Luther King, Jr. was gunned down at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. He had just stepped onto the motel balcony, and he called down to a musician that he recognized on the street level. "Make sure you play 'Precious Lord, Take My Hand' tonight at the meeting," he said. "Play it real pretty." Those were his last words. A few seconds later, he underwent his own crucifixion.

On this of all days, it's crucial to recall that episode in Memphis. But it's actually another important episode in King's ministry that resonates most powerfully on this day: the March from Selma to Montgomery of 1965, when King demonstrated the meaning of resurrection. Do you remember why they marched? For the right to vote. That moment, I submit, is one of the grand historical statements of a people saying to themselves and to the world: We are not ghosts. Our voices shall be heard. Our perspectives shall be considered. Our humanity shall be recognized. It was an enactment of the good news of Easter. It was a realization of the words spoken by

Jesus on Easter evening. They were emerging from the tomb. They were rolling away the stone. They stood in Montgomery to assert their agency, to say “We are not ghosts.”

Listen to what King said when the march finally arrived at the steps of the state capitol building in Montgomery: “Today I want to say to the people of America and the nations of the world: We are not about to turn around. We are on the move now... (And so) let us march on ballot boxes, until we send to our city councils, state legislatures, and the United States Congress (people) who will not fear to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with their God.”¹

Those words are as timely today as they were in 1965. There are a good many people today, including some from the United States Congress, who are trying to put the stone back in place. There are a good many people working to deprive black, brown, and other minoritarian individuals of their agency. There are a good many people doing their best to transform certain segments of America into ghost communities: those who are neither heard nor seen. That was the purpose of the Capitol attack on January 6th. That’s the purpose of the law rolling back voting rights in Georgia. That’s the purpose of the legislation that many Republicans are attempting to enact in 43 states right now: to put the stone of the tomb back in place again, to deprive people of their agency, and to strip them of their voices. They are attempts to turn people into ghosts. Thankfully, many are pushing back, including some conscientious Republicans, who understand how retrograde, how reactionary, and how contrary such measures are to the spirit of democracy. It’s also bears saying that it all stands in stark contrast to the spirit of Easter.

Those measures haven’t shown up in Connecticut, to my knowledge, but for those of you who followed our “Stories from the Deep North” series (which now lives permanently on our website), you’ll know that we have our own work to do. There is the legacy of segregation in predominantly white communities like our own. There is continued recalcitrance among many white residents in our state and in our community about affordable housing. Bigotry and xenophobia are real, right here in Old Lyme. As the spate of violence against Asian-Americans has escalated in recent weeks, it hasn’t escaped my attention that some of the most troubling instances of racial bullying I’ve learned about in Old Lyme have been against people of Asian descent. Those are all ways of rolling the stone back over the tomb. They’re all ways of diminishing human agency. They’re all ways of ensuring that some people continue to live as ghosts.

But the Hallelujah of Easter Sunday is that a force greater than us wishes to have that tomb opened. The Hallelujah of Easter Sunday is that a Spirit greater than whatever would keep the stone in place wishes to roll it away. The Hallelujah of Easter Sunday is the realization that the Spirit that animated Jesus also animates us. It breathes life into each of us, assuring us all that we are not ghosts, but have the agency to make a difference – to build spaces and cultures in which it is no longer necessary to live in the tombs, in which it is no longer necessary to live as ghosts. It means that we don’t have to live in the tomb, and it also surely means that we can no longer participate in building tombs for others. But it’s more too. The Hallelujah of Easter Sunday is the celebration of being with one another, and knowing the world is ours to celebrate, to build, and to create. The Hallelujah of Easter Sunday is to be called to the healing, joyful,

¹ King, Martin Luther, *A Testament of Hope* (New York: HarperOne, 1986), pgs. 228-229.

spirit-building, soul-stirring, humane, restorative work of resurrection faith. The Hallelujah of Easter Sunday comes in the life-affirming proclamation that those who have heretofore haunted the periphery have come fully to life, no longer ghosts, but as those with a powerful voice waiting to be heard. But the Hallelujah of Easter Sunday is spoken to each and every one of you: You are not a ghost.

We've been waiting for you for a while now. We've been clearing the ground in order to welcome you here. It's time to rise, it's time to move, it's time to build, for we are not ghosts.