

My earliest memory is of being a ghost. I was four years old, and I distinctly remember wearing a white sheet with two cut-out eyeholes as I walked down a long, darkened hall towards a doorway. I walked through the doorway, turned to my right, and saw my mother, my father, and my older brother sitting side-by-side on a couch that faced me; they cowered, screamed, and laughed. I pretended to be scary, and they pretended to be scared.

Whether we believe in them or not, ghosts and the impressions they make on those who see them are fascinating. After a lifetime of collecting and investigating ghost stories, English author, broadcaster, parapsychologist, and ghost-hunter Peter Underwood declared that there are eight varieties of ghosts:

- Elementals
- Poltergeists
- Traditional ghosts
- Mental imprint manifestations
- Crisis or Death-survival apparitions
- Time slips
- Ghosts of the Living, and
- Haunted Inanimate Objects

I will spare you his detailed analyses of each, but Underwood clearly believes in ghosts. Interestingly, Underwood asserts that 98% of the reports of ghosts and hauntings are likely to have natural explanations. In other words, even those who believe in ghosts admit that the overwhelming majority of their alleged sightings are misidentifications, hallucinations, or pranks. That is why an appearance of an apparent apparition says more about the person who sees it than the thing being seen.

The Old Testament's sole description of an encounter with a ghost is ambivalent. On the night before a battle with the Philistines, the first king of Israel—King Saul—compels a witch to summon the spirit of the recently-departed prophet Samuel so that Saul can hear how the battle will end. The spirit tells Saul that he will lose and both he and his sons will

die. Hearing this, Saul collapses; on the next day when the battle turns against him, he chooses to fall on his own sword. What was it that Saul saw? On one hand, the spirit of the prophet foretold the truth; it truly could have been Samuel. On the other hand, witchcraft in general—and necromancy in particular—are expressly forbidden in the Law of Moses precisely because it is associated with evil spirits. If the spirit summoned was something other than Samuel, it could be expected that it would bring a message of self-destructive doom. Regardless, whatever Saul saw, the fact that he sought out such illicit supernatural counsel revealed his own desperation which bordered on despair, which is the point of the story of his destruction. Ghosts are mirrors who reflect the viewer's perspective; they reveal more about the person seeing them than what that person actually sees.

In today's Gospel reading, the Disciples are hiding in the Upper Room. We hear that when Jesus suddenly appears to them, "they were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost (Luke 24:37)." As is the case with ghosts, much ink has been spilled over the centuries in speculation about the nature of Jesus' Body after His Resurrection. While His Resurrection Body clearly has a physical continuity with His Crucified Body, it also seems to be profoundly different. He appears and disappears into rooms behind locked doors. Sometimes His followers recognize Him, other times they don't. Mary Magdalene, sitting in the Garden outside His tomb, first thought He was the gardener; only after He calls her name does she finally see Him for Who He is. Fleeing Jerusalem and the threat of being crucified like their Lord, two of His followers did not recognize Him even while they walked beside Him on the road to Emmaus; only after they invite Him to share their supper and He breaks the bread do they see Him—and then He vanishes. In the twelfth century, the medieval Scholastics speculated what His Resurrected Body means for our own. On the Last Day, they wondered, when He raises us from the dead, will we be able to taste, touch, and smell? How old will our body appear to be? They even wondered about fingernails and hair: Will they

grow? Will they need to be cut? We may laugh at such speculations; after all, these were the theological super-nerds who wondered about how many angels could dance on the head of a pin. Nevertheless, we must admire their seriousness of thought as they explored a fundamental dogma which we reaffirm every time we say that Nicene Creed. When we say that we “look for the Resurrection of the Dead,” what is it that we will see? Who will we be when we see it?

In the same way that the appearance of a ghost reveals as much about the viewer as it does the thing being viewed, the appearances of Christ after His Resurrection unveil the inner pain of those who see Him as much as the One Who has come to heal them. Mary Magdalene could not see Him because she was lost in grief; only after He calls out her name, only after He defines and identifies with her feeling of emptiness does she see that He stands beside her and always will. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus cannot recognize Him because they are lost in fear; only after He breaks the bread of companionship with them—which is part of what the Eucharist is—do they see their need to find Him by returning to their fellow-disciples. The same is true for the Apostles in the Upper Room. Like Mary Magdalene, they are sad. Like the Emmaus-bound disciples, they are frightened. But chiefly they are wracked with guilt. In fact, when He appears, they are so haunted by their guilt that they see Him as a ghost. They feel guilty because they are guilty. When the One Whom they promised to love and to follow without fail needed them the most, they abandoned Him to die virtually alone. After Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene, Jesus told her to go to the Apostles and tell them what she has seen. She did, but they were too haunted by guilt to believe. After Jesus revealed Himself to the two disciples on the road, they immediately ran back to Jerusalem to tell the Apostles “how He was known to them in the breaking of bread (Luke 24:35).” In fact, just before today’s reading, those two had just done that. But the Apostles were still too haunted by guilt to believe. And has we just heard, even when He

appears right in front of them, they are too haunted by guilt to believe. Even after He reassures them that He is not a ghost and tells them to look at and even touch the wounds on His Body to prove it, they still do not believe. Only after He takes a piece of broiled fish and eats it do they accept that He is truly risen from the dead and therefore truly is the Messiah. Once they see His transformed physicality, they see that His death was not the end; they see that their sadness, fear, and guilt are not the end; they see that He has been raised to make all things new, including their renewal with the exorcism of their guilt. Having exchanged their suffocating guilt for His life-giving forgiveness, they are sent by Christ to preach to the world what they have received from Him, which is the limitless love of God. In the end, that love is the only thing that brings true healing.

After I was ordained in 1992, I was sent to Washington, DC to serve a congregation in Georgetown. The church itself, built in 1856, was a former African Methodist Episcopal Church that had once been a part of the Underground Railroad. Two years before I got there, the congregation was almost ruined by a terrible fight between two clergy who had once been dear friends. After many months of deep-seated suspicions, lies, and betrayals, the offending clergy finally left. Afterwards, the congregation described a palpable spirit of festering negativity that seemed to stick to the walls. It got so bad that the leadership flew in a priest from the Church of England who had some experience with exorcisms to purge the place. The priest got there, walked around the church for a while, and then said, "This place doesn't need an exorcism. It just needs to be loved." And for the next three days he and another priest peeled away the melted wax on the altar, polished the silver- and brassware, dusted the windowsills and the pews, and thoroughly scrubbed every inch of the sanctuary, nave, balcony, and undercroft. By the time I got there, the church was a jewel box of beauty, serenity, and grace. I never saw any ghosts; I only saw love.

Sometimes we feel so worn down that we almost feel ghostly: spooked and shaken by the spirits of sadness, fear, loneliness, or guilt. But the Cross is the death of every ghostly thing that haunts us; the Empty Tomb is the cradle in which our new life begins. When Christ looks at us, He simply sees children—sometimes sad, sometimes lonely, sometimes guilty ghostly children—who just need to be loved. And because that is what we are, that is what He does.