

Ghosts

Mark 6.14-16

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If it sounds a little bit like Easter this morning, that's just fine because, as Pastor Ned likes to say, every Sunday is a little Easter.

Every Sunday is a reminder that death does not have the last word.

Every Sunday is an opportunity to transform fear to hope.

Every Sunday is a promise that "Christ is risen and we are rising too."

And this Sunday's Easter challenge is this: It's a choice we make about how we will live with our past. Will we be haunted by it? Or will we find healing and hope?

The story for this morning from Mark 6 follows on the heels of the disciples being sent out to heal and to call people to change their lives.

"King Herod heard of it," the story goes on, "because Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, 'John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.' But others said, 'It is Elijah.' And others said, 'It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.' But when Herod heard of it, he said, 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.'"

It sounds like the understanding these folks have of being raised from the dead is more like reincarnation – the past is embodied in the present. Jesus is the reincarnation of the prophets of the past. He is the reincarnation of that old trouble-maker Elijah. For Herod that's bad news because he believes that Jesus is the reincarnation of John whom he beheaded.

And Herod thinks that because he is haunted by two things: (1) the challenge John made to the way Herod was living his life and (2) his complicity in John's death. The choice Herod seems to be making is that he would rather live haunted by the past and the ghost of John the Baptizer than he would to change his ways and find healing for his life and for the life of his people.

He is like Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* who is haunted by loss and guilt but would rather live with the ghosts of his past than to move into the love and the light that is all around him. In that case, it's the ghosts that save him by forcing old Scrooge out of his shadows and into the light. I love

that scene when he throws open the window and asks what day it is. “It’s Christmas,” comes the reply. And Scrooge is giddy, “It’s not too late!”

When Father Mike Raschko writes about this story in Mark, he says that it faces us with the question of “what we want to be eternally and how we fashion that eternal reality by how we live in this world now ... The choices lie before us: bitterness over past injuries or forgiveness;” the policies of revenge or the practice of reconciliation; the isolations of our past or the possibilities of a new kind of community where we recognize ourselves in each other – no matter how different or strange or unusual.

When people talk about “white guilt” getting in the way of racial equality, I think they mean that white folks would rather live with the ghosts of slavery and Jim Crowe than to get on with the work of healing. Like old Ebenezer Scrooge and Kind Herod, we would rather be haunted than healed.

I remember hearing an interview a few years ago by a social psychologist working in Israel whose theory was that the struggle between Israel and the Palestinians will never be resolved until Israelis are able to deal with the ghosts of the holocaust.

Maybe that’s true.

What I know is that we have to make a decision about how we will live with our past. Will we be haunted by it? Or will we go looking for healing and hope?

I hardly ever read the “Ask Amy” advice column in the paper. But I couldn’t miss the letter this week asking: “How do I help a friend who is still haunted by her son’s violent death?” Well, Amy says, don’t let your friend keep re-living that past. Get help now! “Grief is isolating,” she says. “Please don’t give up on her.”

So this week, I’ve been looking for those stories that help to inspire me to choose a way of living with my past that moves beyond being haunted by it to healing and hope.

And I didn’t have to look too far because there is the story about the families of the Nine African-Americans forgiving the young white man who shot their beloved ones. Not being haunted by those images does not mean that any of them will forget – or that any of us should forget. It only means that forgiveness is a pathway out of haunting to healing their own hearts and hope for a different kind of world.

At the very least, this morning, the Confederate flag isn't flying at the South Carolina statehouse anymore. Whatever hope there is for expanding justice in that one change, came about because nine families refused to be haunted by bitterness, hate, and revenge. It's a resurrection story because the whole state is having choose how they will live with their past.

A couple weeks ago, I was watching the "Trailblazers" awards held at the Church of St. John the Divine in New York City. It was an evening honoring those who have been leaders in the movement for justice for people regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

One of the people they honored that night was Judy Shepard, the mother of the young gay man in Wyoming who was beaten unconscious by two men and then tied to a fence in a remote field where he was left to die alone. I am still haunted by that image.

But Judy refused to live there. She was honored that night because she is spending her life working for a world where other people's children are safe regardless of who they are. That's the only way for her to move on in healing and hope.

Several years ago I read Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker's book about domestic violence – horrible stories of abuse and, too often, the church's complicity in justifying it. They are haunting images. But when they came to the end of their story, they offer a blessing:

*Let us say that life shows us the face of God
only in fleeting glimpses,
by the light of night fires,
in dancing shadows,
in departing ghosts ...*

*Let us say this is enough,
enough for us to run with perseverance the race that is set before us,
enough for us to stand against violence,
enough for us to hold each other in benediction and blessing.*

Let us say that life shows us the face of God ... in departing ghosts.

What haunts you? Maybe they are images that are less dramatic than some of these but they are no less real.

I used to think that I was haunted by my past failures. But the truth is, what I am really haunted by is shame – that all those past failures add up to the one big failure I am. And, when I am haunted by shame, I need help to get out. I can't talk myself out of those ghosts. I can't work my way into a happy place. I can't imagine that my life will ever be anything but a long string of failures because the ghost of shame has its grip on me.

Sometimes I am haunted by the ghost of comparisons. If we were really a good pastor like so-and-so, this sanctuary would be full. The budget would be balanced. The people would be out there saving the world.

And it doesn't matter how good things really are because, when I am haunted by the ghost of comparison, there isn't any winning. Things are never good enough. Someone is always better.

Advice columnist, Amy, is right. When someone is haunted, the only way out is to get help; to not isolate; to know that there is someone who will not give up on us.

On this little bit of Easter, the choice we have to make is how we will live with our past. Will we be haunted by it? Or will we do the work of healing and hope?

In the resurrection appearances at the end of the gospels, Jesus makes clear to the disciples that he is not a ghost. He doesn't want them to be haunted by the horrible things that happened at the end of his life. He doesn't want them to treat their neighbors with bitterness and revenge. He doesn't want them to lose hope.

He doesn't say 'go into all the world and make them pay for what they did to me.' He says, 'go into all the world and preach the good news' that death, in all its forms, will never have the last word; that fear can be transformed into hope; that no matter how haunting the bad news may be, there is good news rising too.

It may not seem like very much, but let us say that it is enough to see the face of God in departing ghosts and to hold each other in benediction and blessing.

This morning is a little Easter -- the day of resurrection! Earth, tell it out abroad.

And today, if you hear that voice – the voice that says you don't have to be haunted anymore, there is healing and hope, you can get help, you are not alone, you don't have to give up – today, if you hear that voice, please do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

Father Mike Raschko, *A Companion to the Gospel of Mark* (Twenty-Third Publications, 2003), p.76. “Ask Amy” in the *Seattle Times* Friday, July 10, 2015. Judy Shepard, *The Meaning of Matthew* (PLUME, 2009). Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes* (Beacon Press, 2001), p.252.