HOCUS POCUS
Scripture: Luke 24:36b-48

FOCUS: Having experienced the risen Lord, we are called to go and tell his story and ours.

It is a dangerous thing to come up with a sermon title before the sermon is written. I really am not sure where I was going when I chose this weeks title but there is an interesting theory concerning the origin of the term hocus pocus. Some trace it to the Latin phrase from the communion liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church,  [***hoc***](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/hoc)[***est***](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/est)[*enim*](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/enim)[***corpus***](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/corpus)[*meum*](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/meum) which means “this is surely my body. Of course for many years the term hocus pocus has been associated with magic and sleight of hand. Today we will be considering the appearances of Jesus which certainly were magical in the best sense of the word, but which were not at all about sleight of hand.

Several years ago Michael O’Neill’s neighbors in Middlesbrough, England became concerned when they didn’t see or hear from him for several days. They called the police who broke down the door of his flat to find no trace of O’Neill nor anything to indicate his whereabouts. There was no note, no sign of foul play, no evidence of a break-in. A few weeks later an obituary appeared in the local paper for Michael O’Neill. Among the relatives listed were his two brothers, Kevin and Terry.

The neighbors were dumbfounded when they read of his demise. There had been no indication that a body had been found, no relatives claiming his personal belongings, no word of a hospitalization. In fact there had been no word at all. But it certainly was his obituary, they recognized his brothers’ names. If the neighbors were surprised by what they read, they were flabbergasted a few days later when one of then received a postcard from the dearly departed, dated a couple of days after the obituary was printed, telling how much fun he was having on his vacation in Australia.

It seems that O’Neill had simply taken a spur of the moment trip without having thought to tell his neighbors. A few days after his postcard arrived he was back home, tanned, very healthy and shocked to find his door battered down and police watching his home. In an incredible coincidence, it turns out that there was another Michael O’Neill who had indeed passed away, and who also had brothers named Terry and Kevin.

It must have been a surreal experience to receive that postcard and then to witness the shock on O’Neill’s face when he returned home. Had I been one of the neighbors, I might well have suspected O’Neill was trying to pull some kind of fast one. Insurance fraud, debt cancellation or perhaps just some kind of sick practical joke. But none of that was the case. He simply went away for a while and now he was back, alive and well. ***“Everywhere I go, people I know are grabbing hold of my hand saying ‘I thought you were dead!’”*** O’Neill told *The Daily Telegraph.* ***“They can’t believe it’s me, that I’m still alive. I’m a nervous wreck because everywhere I go people keep grabbing me!”***

Jesus had a similar experience when he returned from beyond the grave. Of course his story was far more remarkable than was O’Neill’s. Jesus had indeed been dead. That was common knowledge. A massive crowd of the faithful and cynics alike, of both political and religious authorities, and a goodly number of curious onlookers had witnessed his death and had seen the body taken down and carried to the tomb. So it is no wonder that the disciples thought they had seen a ghost or had a vision when Jesus came to them in a locked upper room.

It was not the first time that Jesus had made a post resurrection appearance. The disciples were meeting with the two who had seen Jesus on the Emmaus road. They were listening to their story and, as you might expect were skeptical. I know I certainly would have been! Then, as they were talking together, Jesus appeared in their midst. Isn’t that the way it often happens? For us, at least for me, it is not a literal appearance, but Jesus’ Holy Spirit seems to show up most often when folks are talking and thinking about him.

It is not that Jesus ever desires to be distant. Far from it, Jesus seeks to surround us with his Holy Spirit day by day. Yet we all fail far too often to make time or place for him in our often hectic lives. It is my experience that spiritual drought comes most often when I have failed to make time to think about matters of the kingdom of God and to gather with you and other fellow sojourners. I find that I feel most distant from God when I haven’t given God much thought for a while.

 ***“Peace be with you.”*** That is the simple but profound greeting Jesus offers as he appears out of nowhere to the frightened and down heartened men in the room that day. Throughout his ministry Jesus offered peace wherever he went and it was with peace that Jesus challenged those who would follow him to greet others. We must never forget that peace and security are not synonyms. The disciples were afraid and hiding behind locked doors. The threat of persecution and perhaps even death was very real. The recent events of Holy Week had made that clear. Yet Jesus offers these frightened followers peace, and he means it.

We hear a lot about security in this age of terrorism. The threats are very real and I am glad that we have skilled professionals who are charged with maintaining our security. But security alone is not enough to bring meaning to life. I suspect that, like me, most of you know folks who, by the standards of the world, are quite secure yet have no peace. They have plenty of material wealth, good jobs, fine homes and all kinds of creature comforts, yet they are restless and dissatisfied. For them life is never good enough, every glass is half empty and the whole world is populated by idiots.

On the other hand, some of the kindest, most loving, most peaceful folks I know live on the edge much of the time. They have modest homes, old cars and little job security. They worry at times that they will not have enough cash left at the end of the month to pay the bills, yet they are generous, never refusing those in need. They are at peace, not because they face no challenges, but because they never face life’s challenges alone. They are at peace not because they are always safe and secure but because they have found that life has real meaning only as we take risks and offer ourselves unequivocally to God and to each other no matter what the consequences.

Jesus appears to the disciples and offers them peace. Scripture tells us that the disciples are filled with joy, disbelief and puzzlement. I love the irony. We don’t generally equate joy with disbelief and confusion do we? But when it comes to matters of God’s kingdom there are truths which are so wonderful as to be confusing and we are all called to experience a kind of joy which is, to those who have never experienced it, quit unbelievable. Does it make sense for folks struggling to make ends meet to know joy while some of the richest and most comfortable live miserable lives? Is the kind of joy which comes from sacrificial living really believable in the eyes of those who have yet to experience it? In a wonderfully serendipitous way all who truly and completely open themselves to the presence of the risen Christ will inevitably know real, at times confusing, often unbelievable joy, just as did those disciples long ago.

Recognizing that the disciples were confused, Jesus met them at the point of their confusion. In those days encounters with what were thought to be ghosts and the experiencing of visions were rather commonplace. But the one who stood before them in that room was no ghost and what they were encountering was not a vision. Jesus was in that very room. In that culture ghosts were thought to be wispy, ethereal creatures who neither ate nor drank. And of course visions were even less tangible than ghosts. Jesus sought to demonstrate beyond any doubt that he was neither a ghost nor a vision but was truly resurrected and alive. That is why he asked for something to eat. He recognized the confusion which accompanied their joy and he met them there. And he recognizes our sometimes confused joy and will meet us there as well if we let him.

Having met their confusion with physical evidence, Jesus spoke to the gathered disciples of another matter. Jesus reminded them of the message which he had repeatedly spoken and of the truths which he had sought, unsuccessfully, to share with those who traveled with him. Then, scripture teaches, he opened their minds to understand that he was the messiah, the fulfillment of scripture, the source of salvation and forgiveness. He seeks to open our minds to his truth.

Having met them, having revealed his truth Jesus challenged the disciples. Each of the four gospels ends with a call to mission issued to the faithful from beyond the grave. In John, Peter is given the challenge to feed Jesus sheep, to tend his lambs. In both the short and long endings of Mark’s gospel we find the charge to proclaim the message of salvation. In Matthew we find the most famous command, the Great Commission, the charge to go into all the world to proclaim the gospel and to baptize. And here in Luke the disciples were called to witness, to proclaim the message of repentance and forgiveness. We are all called to be witnesses.

Witnessing, evangelism, words which can strike fear into the hearts of good church folk. For those of us of the baby boom generation it may be a residual response to traumatic experiences from the past. I grew up with the notion that evangelism meant encountering unsuspecting strangers, confronting them with the fear of eternal damnation and offering a canned message accompanied by a tract. For some, such methods were comfortable and met with at least a degree of success. But for many of us it was uncomfortable and unproductive. It was not until much later in life that I came to encounter the wonderful and liberating notion that evangelism comes in all sorts of packages and does not have to be confrontational or even uncomfortable.

It has been my experience that the most effective evangelistic tools are marked more by compassion then confrontation, more by kindness than by condemnation. I have told the story before, but it bears repeating Ralph Sigler tells of a previous member of Harvest Church who for a number of years was the manager of Dillard’s Department Store. His style was a refreshing contrast to the type of self-centered, ruthless management which has been so much in the news over the past decade. Unlike so many “big bosses”, he was loved and respected by all of his employees, who often referred to him, not as the manger, but as the pastor of Dillards. He gained that reputation, not because he carried a big bible around, not because he was always leaving tracts in the bathroom. He did neither. He earned the title because he genuinely cared for the employees, all the employees. When he asked about their families, he did so because he was genuinely concerned. When they had problems he listened, not because he had too, but because he cared. And when the opportunity presented itself, and it did every day, he would offer them Christ. When co-workers came with heartaches or tragedies he would ask if he could pray with them. They inevitably were deeply grateful. Have you ever noticed that with very few exceptions, when offered in the right spirit, even people who never darken the door of the church appreciate prayer?

When Jesus appeared after his resurrection his message was clear, Peace be with you, go and witness. How are we to do that? One of the best ways I know of is to intentionally seek to become one of the pastors of your workplace, or of your classroom, of your home or your civic club. Care for people, offer them compassion and grace, and when the opportunity presents itself give them Christ. Do that day in and day out and I guarantee that your witness will be welcomed and you will be blessed, for people today are hungry for real genuine spiritual encounters.

What about you? Do those whose lives touch yours everyday even know that you are a person of faith? Would anyone in your class or on your job or in your social group come to you for prayer or consider sharing their deepest pain? If they did would you offer them Jesus? If so, well done, good and faithful servant. If not hear this morning the call to go and to witness and to pastor. For your sake, for the sake of all God’s children and for the sake of the kingdom of God, let it be so, In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN.