

Jesus Met Them
EASTER – April 24, 2011
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When I was a boy I didn't really have much of a religious upbringing. But I did have a particular way of imagining God. I only went to Sunday School a handful times before stopping altogether. But I still came away with an image. I must have been six or so. One day, I *insisted* that I draw my image of God for my mother. So, I dragged her into the playroom where my art supplies were already waiting. The paper was ready, along with a bright red marker. I sat her down and I drew God.

It was a basic outline of a generic Halloween style ghost. The arms were raised from its sides, and held up on either side of the head. Where legs would be on a human there was a tapered, ice cream cone-like shape. It had two hollow and rather *angry looking* eyes and a frowning mouth. There *were* two features that made it more than a generic ghost. They were small, but significant. Emblazoned on its chest, right in the middle of everything was a cross. On the head of the ghost was a crown. So, God was a scary looking, crown wearing, cross bearing ghost.

I have been thinking about that image lately. It strikes me that it is not too far from the way that many people view God. And I think some religious perspectives imagine God that way, too.

For many people God is something of a ghost. Maybe those people have heard about God just like we hear stories around a campfire or dinner table. They might really enjoy some of those stories. But whether or not they *believe* them is another matter. Or maybe they learned about God second hand. Perhaps they have friends or relatives who have had powerful encounters with God that they have heard about for years. But what they *think* about that might be another matter.

Some faiths seem to treat God as a sort of ghost—or at least someone or something very unlike us humans. Both Judaism and Islam imagine God to be a well intentioned, but never-the-less distant spirit. There is an inherent “otherness” about God; both Judaism and Islam seem to profess that God's holiness brings with it a certain necessary displacement from what human beings experience. A recent article in the *Christian Century* comparing Muslim and Christian concepts of God received a number of follow up letters. One letter said that descriptions of Allah found in the Muslim holy book *The Qur'an* indicate “no direct engagement on Allah's part *inside* the human dimensions of space and time...”¹ God is so far out from human experience

¹ *Christian Century*, April 19, 2011, pg. 6 from a letter by John C. Rankin, West Simsbury, Connecticut. Emphasis mine.

that even basic concepts we contend with constantly are not something with which the holy one engages *at all*.

Certain Jewish traditions assert that a close encounter between a human being and God would be very risky. In fact, when Moses asks to see God face to face, he is rebuffed because “no one can see God and live.”² Are you with me in imagining the scene from *Raiders of the Lost Ark* when the spirits representing the Glory of God fly off the Ark and literally melt the humans who dared to open it? There you go: more angry ghosts!

It is not just other religious traditions that treat God as far removed from human experience, or overwhelmingly powerful, or ghost-like. Many Christians seem similarly inclined. There are certain Christian Biblical scholars who explain the Resurrection as a sort of ghost story.³ They focus on the psychological aspects of the event and stress that what really mattered was the actions that the Disciples took afterwards. They assert that the Disciples acted *as if* Jesus had risen from the dead because that was the way they were able to make sense out of whatever their experience actually *was*. To my mind and heart that seems to suppose one of two unflattering things about the first Disciples. First, that they must be less able to name their experiences than we are some twenty centuries later. I don't buy that. As much as I would like to think that we humans have evolved emotionally over the years, I don't see much evidence of that. We still fight and feud, make war, pollute and all the rest—only now with more deadly weapons. Another possibility is that the Disciples must have lied, because they sure paid a lot of attention to Christ's *body* after the Resurrection.

In this morning's reading Mary Magdalene and the other Mary *touch* Christ's *feet*. In Luke's gospel Jesus *walks and talks* with disciples and *shares food* with them—*twice*. And in John's gospel he *goes fishing with them* before joining in a fish fry. Touch; walking and talking; sharing food; going fishing and making a fire to eat some fish, and then eating them—I am not sure why a spirit would need to do any of that. Those are some pretty vivid and specific bodily events. I think they would be kind of hard to mistake for something else. So, why is there so much attention paid to so many bodily things throughout *all four gospels*? Now, I personally do believe there was a bodily resurrection. But you may not, and I am okay with that. There is a more important message in these stories than a set up for an argument about bodies and spirits, and tired old ideas about literal truth.

What this story really tells us about is *where we meet God*. When Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went out that morning they were sure that they were on the way to tend to a corpse. It was the morning of the third day since Jesus had been crucified. They had seen him die. There wasn't time to bury him properly before night fell and the Sabbath day began, which

² Exodus 33:20, and Chapter 33 generally.

³ See Borg and Crossan in particular.

would mean no work. So they laid him in a tomb provided by Joseph of Arimathea and waited. But their expectations were changed. Upon arriving they met an angel—that is to say, they *received a message from God*—which said that Jesus was not only raised from the dead, but was also on the way back to their shared home of Galilee. The angel also instructed them to spread the word to the male Disciples so they could *all* meet Jesus in Galilee. Understandably, they were overwhelmed. They left in what the reading describes as “fear and *great* joy,”⁴ and they did so at top speed, running off to share the astounding news.

On the way, their expectations were changed *again*, because all at once Jesus *met* them. He didn’t appear in a bright vision. He was not lightning bright in dazzling white clothes like the angel with whom they *had just spoken*. They did not have to avert their eyes or risk being turned to crisps or melting. It was just Jesus, as they had always known him to be. He came to meet them. And their first instinct was to touch him. They grabbed hold of his feet and they worship him. Now if there had ever been a doubt as to who Jesus was before, they now knew for sure that the Holy One was right in front of them. They touched him, and *they worshipped him*.

The essential Christian message is that God *can* be known. While there will always be much about God which *is* beyond our understanding, our faith tells us that God is never beyond our hands or hearts. We can touch our God. We can meet our God. We can love our God as our God has loved us. God values our human experiences so highly that through Jesus Christ God has experienced what it is to be human. Through Jesus Christ, God tasted the full array of human experiences—love and compassion, tenderness, fear, suffering, healing and even death. God does not stay remote from us in the Christian story. And God calls us into experiencing Godhood through following the way of Jesus.

This is what sets ours apart from other faiths. *This* is why I am delighted and overwhelmed to have been called into the Christian tradition through God’s grace. God is here *with us*—not just somewhere beyond our reach as a distant, if benevolent, overseer. And God is calling us into the Holy family through our brother and Savior Jesus. Even at those trying times in our lives when we think God may just be dead, God is ready to change our expectations and rise again in our lives. Even when we expect to find God in one place, God may just meet us unexpectedly in another place entirely. Friends, there is no place human beings can go where God will not come to meet us. Wherever you are in life, God wants to meet *you*.

Not every one of us can be Mary Magdalene or the other Mary. We will most likely not touch Christ’s feet directly. We may never get a big bear hug *directly* from our Savior. Most of us will touch or be touched by God through our fellow humans. And this, too, is a blessing and a way that God is active and alive in our lives. We also touch and are touched by our God through the

⁴ Matthew 28:8.

love of the others who stand with us in the body of believers. God meets us through human beings. Through compassion and love expressed through real flesh and blood people. And that's no ghost story!

Amen?

Matthew 28:1-10

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. 2And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. 3His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. 4For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. 5But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. 6He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. 7Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.” 8So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. 9Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. 10Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”