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Sirach 3:17-21  
Lk 24:36-43

**“Trick or Treat: Finding a Life of Faith in a Very, Scary World”**

I'd like to thank you for welcoming me into your community and giving me the opportunity to break open the Word with you today. The theme I would like to explore with you is the nature of our life of faith... how do we live a life of faith in our world? In the lives we have—each of us—how is it that we cultivate our life of faith?

When I considered how to talk about this subject, I thought that I could talk about our faith life as being groomed and nurtured within our local parish communities. Or how our faith is grounded in our denominations and in the Church more universally. But even though our faith is cultivated in our parishes and educated through our denominations, I don't think your faith or mine can be contained by the institution of Church, per se. So I realized, I had to start somewhere else.

And then I noticed it's just 10 days before Halloween. As we can see from our Gospel reading for today, our Christian tradition has some pretty good ghost stories, most of them featuring Jesus after his resurrection. After all, who can resist a good ghost story or two?

It makes sense to start with Halloween, since it kicks off three days of intense celebration in the Christian tradition. All Hallow's Eve is the night prior to the day that through most of Christian centuries has been considered one of the holiest of days: All Saints Day, commemorating all the designated holy people within our tradition. All

Saint's Day is then followed on November 2 by my all time favorite holiday, All Soul's Day, commemorating all faithful people—people like me and you who just are trying to live a life of faith. Just you average person who tried to believe.

What is it we try to believe?

I think the best way get into this is to tell you a story—a ghost story, of sorts. It's a story about my conversion back to Christianity after a ten year period of exploring different spiritual traditions. Almost twenty years ago, I had an encounter that literally scared me into believing.

I was living in Rome at the time because I was doing research for my dissertation. I rented a room that was near the Vatican, and would walk around St. Peter's often in awe of the beauty of the church, and wondering about the faith of the people who prayed there. I was agnostic, but was definitely starting to feel a pull toward faith. But I just couldn't believe yet.

My research interests revolved around Francis of Assisi and the Franciscan tradition, so during those years I would often steal away from Rome and go to Assisi. I would go to Assisi as much to reflect in the churches associated with Francis and Clare as to do research in the archives. I came to expect a spiritual peace and intense experiences of meditation during those visits to Assisi. Just spending time in that hill town was bringing me closer to faith. But I would often sit there in the churches or in the library with this gnawing doubt in my mind: "I'm just not sure about all of this about faith."

So it was in this place of my life, that I witnessed something that literally shocked into wanting to believe.

One January morning, deep in winter, I left my *pensione* at 6:00 to walk the streets of Assisi. Outside it was dark and foggy. The fog made the cobblestone slippery and the air heavy and cold. All I could hear was the click of my heels as I walked toward the church of Sta. Chiara, where I was heading to be with the sisters as they prayed the morning office.

When I arrived there at the side door, I turned the door handle and the door creaked open. The heels of my shoes tapped slowly across the stone floor to the side chapel where the sisters were sitting, waiting to pray. Soon the church was filled with their sweet soprano voices. I slipped inside the glass door and sat quietly down in the very last pew while I took in the medieval frescoes, and finally closed my eyes to listen to the prayerful chanting of the sisters.

As their prayer ended, I wanted more. The nuns voices had transported me to another place, that I wasn't ready to leave. So I decided to visit the tomb of St. Clare, which is situated just below the very chapel the nuns had prayed in.

The church was still very dark. And at this point there was no one in the church except for me; the sisters had returned to their cloistered world. And no other tourists had ventured out this early. My heels tapped my way down the stairs. I could hear my own hesitation as my footsteps slowed the further I went down to the crypt. The further I descended, the darker it got so that I literally had to feel my way down the stairs by touching the walls.

Suddenly I started thinking about all the creepy movies I had seen as a kid. After all, it was dark and foggy outside; I was all alone; I was now walking down into a dark crypt....into the unknown; facing the unexpected. I started thinking about ghosts.

I groped my way down the dark stairs, until I eventually found myself in complete dark. All the while I kept one hand on the wall, to keep some bearing...some way to turn around and run back up the stairs, in case there was a sudden need to escape...some unknown danger. I stood there at the bottom of the stairs and eventually saw a small glimmer of light ahead of me, further in. And so I did what they always do in movies, as the music becomes strained....I headed toward the dim light.

As I felt my way along the cold, stone walls toward that faint, blue-ish light, I began to feel as if I might be about to witness something more than just a tomb of a saint. I was primed for some ultimate experience of faith.... a vision, perhaps. Whatever it was, I hoped that I might be about to experience something that would make me finally believe.

I approached Clare's tomb and saw the image of her laid out across her sarcophagus. The light was now clear, but still weak—probably a 15 watt bulb—And in that dim light at the tomb of St. Clare I did see an ultimate expression of faith that I least expected:

I was startled and jumped and even gasped when I saw emerging from behind the image of Clare, a figure... it was a Poor Clare sister, complete with latex gloves and wash cloth, carrying her bucket of soapy water—washing off the carved image of St. Clare, herself.

There it was, right before me.

The realities of the life of faith.

They're not ethereal. They're not grandiose. They're not even all that complex. The life of faith is made up of taking care little things--which in turn come to mean so much.

Why wash down a tomb that is separated from the majority of visitors by a sheet of glass except out of deep reverence, the deepest of love, the deepest of faith?

In his book, *The Good Conscience*, Carlos Fuentes sums up the kind of faith I witnessed that morning and the faith that both of our Scripture passages speak to today. Fuentes writes, “God wants us to be faithful in little ways...that are put within our reach. We are mortal....and we can do no more than fulfill the daily duties of our condition. There are great things which do not depend on us. The sublime is far above us. [Yet] each of us in our own ways fulfills the divine law.”

This is the stuff of real visions.

All the horror movies and a lot of pious movies about saints try to make the life of faith out to be beyond this life. And, it would seem from our Gospel reading that the earliest disciples did, too, at first. After all they thought they were seeing a ghost!

But then Christ reached out to them. He reached out with the simplest of gestures. “Got anything to eat?” He asked to be fed. A simple request to be sure, but a request that required profound faith to fulfill: to feed the resurrected Christ with broiled fish. A simple gesture that teaches us that our life of faith is lived out in this life...not in any mysterious or supernatural way....but in small gestures.

And so here we are in this little church...our life of faith is not so very much different from the original disciples. It’s certainly not grandiose or impressive in the ways our world is so often impressed. But you continue to show up for some reason...some reason we call faith.

In just a few minutes after we have shared some of our lives together here in this chapel in worship, many of us will make a bee-line toward the parish house where there

are some tasty snacks waiting. And around that table and in the gardens we will share our lives together in fellowship.

In these particular moments, consider whatever nourishment it is you take from this place—this small church—and then take whatever it is beyond these walls—to wherever it is you go. And there—in that place: experience your faith in every small thing you do.

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