It was unprecedented. No one had ever been raised from the dead. How would anyone believe it? What proof of life would convince his disciples that he was alive?

My friend Peter Marty tells the story of a similar predicament a few years ago that befell one Charles Hubbard of Austin, Texas. The Vietnam vet got a letter from the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs informing him that he was dead, and his family needed to return thousands of dollars in benefits. A victim of stolen identity, Hubbard found his checking account closed by the VA. After he made an extensive case for being alive, the VA informed him that it would take eight months for him to be officially brought back to life. That’s when they would restore his pension benefits.¹

We’re told in our text today from Luke’s Gospel that when Jesus showed up, his disciples were frightened by his presence. They thought they were seeing a ghost. Of course they did. They had no categories for this. Who would?

Maybe they were influenced by the Greek philosophy that was in the air. The Greeks thought that when we die, our soul is released from our body as the carcass is left behind. Maybe they thought Jesus was now an airy being and what they were seeing was an apparition. But that isn’t what Jews thought of the afterlife. They didn’t think of us as divided beings, body and soul. Some Jews back then thought that when you died, you were just dead and all that was left of you was a memory to be kept alive or forgotten by the generations to follow. Others believed in the idea of general resurrection of the dead to come at the End of Days when God would raise the righteous and restore the faithful to life in the world to come. But that would

¹ https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/april-15-easter-3b-24-36b-48?code=ZGj0Dh64IRAEQIV0aQb&utm_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm_campaign=Email+Campaign+2018+09+11+08+32+Copy+11&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_b00cd618da-e786bc49b3-82666687
be all at once.

Here is Jesus, by himself, looking like the man they once knew. Undead. Somehow. What would you think?

Last week we heard the story from John’s Gospel about how Jesus appeared to most of the disciples and then to doubting Thomas. Remember, these Gospels weren’t written right away, and we don’t know who consulted with whom in the writing of them. John’s Gospel was the last to be written; we’re pretty sure of that. But this appearance story in Luke has some of the same marks as John’s story, with more things included. Wait for it …

In both accounts, Jesus sees that his friends are doubting and afraid. He presents himself to them in a bodily way, showing them his wounds that are still visible but healed. Touch me and see, he says, for a ghost doesn’t have flesh and bones as you see that I have.

Proof of life, wouldn’t you think? But that seems not to be enough. They see his hands and feet but even in their joy, we are told, they are disbelieving and wondering.

I think we should stop here and notice that Jesus wanted them to see and believe, and the way he approached them about it was to convince them that he was alive in a bodily and personal way. Faith would not be enough if it were only a lifting of their spirits, a sense of inner hope that suddenly filled them with confidence that he was alive with God in some spiritual or ghostly way. We need to know that the risen Christ is among us in a way that makes a difference on earth, not just in heaven. And he knows that too.

After my Easter sermon a few weeks ago, I got an email from a man in Fort Worth who had listened to it the following Sunday on WRR radio. He challenged me a bit about my dismissal of people who go to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and the Garden Tomb to be near where Jesus had been buried. I had too blithely said that that spirituality didn’t align with the word of the angel at the tomb that “he is not here, but there,” as I put it. He likened my treatment of that to Lucy, who was always pulling the ball away from Charlie Brown when he went to kick it. His point was that people need to see and
experience Jesus in his risen state in a bodily, tangible way; being in those holy places gives some people a sense of that.

I admitted that I may have overdone it in making my point. Preachers sometimes exaggerate, don't you know?! I didn't intend to suggest that we should now only experience Christ in a spiritual way in our hearts. I stand by my interpretation of what the angel said, but I admit it could have led people to think that genuine spirituality is only a feeling or a mental construct, not a bodily experience in everyday life. We see in this text that Jesus understood how important that is too.

But it seems that even seeing Jesus' hands and feet wasn't proof of life enough. They needed something more.

So, Jesus asks them if they have anything to eat, and they give him a piece of broiled fish. He takes it and eats it in their presence, indicating that our Savior in his risen state had some of the same characteristics of bodily human life that he had before his death and resurrection. Even a digestive track!

This teaches us something we want to know about what happens when we die. People talk about life after death as if that is all we can expect. Whatever happens at the moment of death is your eternal state. But while they had already seen how Jesus was different, able to enter a room through a locked door as in the Thomas story or able to move about quickly by appearing and disappearing as in the story in Luke that preceded this one with the men on the road to Emmaus, this shows that the risen Christ has a resurrected body that is at home on earth and in heaven at the same time. We talk about going to heaven when we die, but this story shows us that there’s something more to expect than life after death in heaven. As the New Testament scholar, N. T. Wright, puts it, this is life after life after death. What was already true for Jesus will one day be true for all of us: we will experience a new creation. We will be ourselves, just as he told them that It is I myself. But we will have a resurrection body that is at home in heaven and earth both at the same time.

We have all experienced life in a weird in-between state for more
than a year now during COVID-19. We’ve had virtual church, watching on TV or computer screens. We have missed being with one another in the flesh, and some have wondered if church really requires it at all. Maybe the spiritual nature of the church is just like that. It’s a practice for heaven. We have to get used to being present without touch, without hugs, without eating together in each other’s presence.

But something real is missing in that. We feel the absence, despite Zoom and FaceTime and voice calls. We sense the anxiety that comes from bodily separation. Some people haven’t slept well. Some wonder if they will live long enough ever to see their loved ones in the flesh again.

The promise packed in this story of the risen Christ eating with his disciples is that whatever differences there are in life after death, there is life after life after death. God plans for us to know one another in a bodily way and to enjoy each other’s presence in the new creation.

The psalmist expressed the longing of people to see some good, to experience the light of God’s face shining upon them, to have a gladness in their heart, and to know the peace of good sleep that comes from lying down in safety. These are not mere spiritual longings; they are desires for life in the here and now that is filled with God’s presence.

When my daughter, Cameron, was a little girl, there was a prayer that hung on the wall over her bed. You probably know it. We would say it with her every night as part of her bedtime ritual. Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep.

The next lines were changed from the one’s I learned as a child that kept me terrified even though the prayer was supposed to bring comfort. Some of you know what I mean. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. That didn't bring much peace.

The prayer we said with Cameron changed those lines to these: Angels watch me through the night and wake me with the morning light. Amen.

Much better, right? But it gets even better. Right under the prayer, right after the Amen, was the ancient symbol of the
ICHTHYS, the Greek word that became an acronym for early Christians. The letters stand for Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.

Well, when we finished the prayer each night and said Amen, thinking we were done, Cameron would say, FISH. At first, we didn’t know what she was saying. But then she pointed to the symbol after the Amen. The symbol of the fish. The word for fish in Greek is ICHTHYS.

And then it all made sense. Fish. The presence of Christ made known to us after all of our last AMENs. FISH. Hmm, proof of life in a tangible way. I guess we all need that, after all. Amen.