

CAN THE DEAD VISIT US?

Acts 12: 1-17

One of the privileges of being a minister is that people share some remarkable stories of real-life experiences they've had. Some of these stories include some real-life visitations people have had from the dead, often those close to them. Here's a story I read recently:

Doug was visiting the grave of his ex-wife, Katherine, in the Gatineau hills of southern Quebec. Katherine had died seven years earlier. Doug sat on the grass among the planted geraniums for half an hour or so, pondering the rise and fall of their marriage. He told Katherine or her grave, that he was sorry for the part he had played in the breakdown of their marriage. Then, plucking up and tossing a handful of grass, he got up and began his two-and-a-half hour motorcycle ride back to Montreal. The sky was overcast and it began to rain. Worry started to move through Doug, mingling with a deep sadness he felt inside. Riding in the rain was not going to be pleasant.

But then, about half-way through his journey, he says that he felt Katherine very vividly. At first, it wasn't a physical sensation, but rather a nice, strong feeling of her presence with him. But then, there came a distinct sensation of her arms around him and her leaning in close against his back. Doug says it was "tactile and fantastic." He felt warm, calm and happy, smiling from ear to ear. His nervousness about the rain also lifted that moment and it occurred to him that maybe Katherine was there to keep him safe on behalf of their two sons. He says that her presence rode behind him for about 20 minutes or so. And in his words: "it did not feel at all like a product of my imagination... It felt external to me. It felt real."

Now Doug is not someone particularly religious or spiritual. He is rational and scientifically minded, an amateur astronomer and the son of an engineer. And like many in North America who distrust non-scientific phenomena as imaginary, Doug would be careful with whom he would share such a story... Why is this so?

Before we explore this question a little more, let me share one more story. Jasmine was a member of my former congregation. She was in her 40s when I first met her and in a motorized wheelchair. One day I asked her what happened, so she told me her story. Jasmine had grown up in Jamaica. One day in her late teens, she was walking home with some friends after a party. She went to cross the street to her home. Out of nowhere, a car came racing down the street not slowing down. Before Jasmine had a chance to realize what was happening and get out of the way, she was hit and sent flying. Even though Jasmine survived the accident, she became paralyzed from the waist down. The driver of the car was charged with impaired driving. He even spent time in prison.

Eventually Jasmine came to Canada and raised her children as a single mom. With support she managed quite well, but she also had to come to terms with the reality of what had happened to her and grieve all she could never do in her life. Even though she had let go at some level what had happened and had moved on with her life, something felt unreconciled.

Then, one night, she had an extremely vivid dream. In the dream the man who had struck her visited her. With a look of deep distress and tears in his eyes, he asked her for forgiveness for what he had done to her. At that moment Jasmine realized what it was that was unreconciled in her. She told him she forgave him. When she woke up the next day, she couldn't let go the vividness of the dream. She felt peace in a way she had not felt it before, but also some concern. Later that day she got a call from her aunt back in Jamaica. Evidently the night before, this man had been killed in a car accident, probably drunk again. Jasmine was speechless. The man had died and he had come to visit her in her dreaming. In Jasmine's mind, this meant that his spirit needed forgiveness in order to be released and transition. Isn't this a remarkable story?

Finally, let me also acknowledge that on this Remembrance Sunday many of those who have died we think of with affection and gratitude, as well as sadness, are those who have died in times of war, on the field of battle or as peacekeepers, or as those on the front lines trying to care for the injured and dying. It will come as no surprise that there are many studies of war veterans who share stories of visitations they've had in dreams or even when awake, visitations often from dead comrades. However they process such visitations, often there is a feeling of gratitude for such experiences and a feeling of connection that becomes part of their healing journey.

No doubt some of you here in person and online will have your own stories of visitations, either experiences you yourselves have had or experiences others have shared with you.

OK, so how do we make sense of such stories and experiences? In our highly rationalistic and scientifically minded western world, psychologists and medical researchers have tended to dismiss such experiences as having to do with anomalies in the brain, hallucinations of the imagination and mental visualizations that arise from trauma and grief. They are not real the way you and I together in this space are real. And more than that. The traditional claim of modern science is that lingering on such visions and visitations holds people back from healing from the grief and moving on.

Sigmund Freud, the father of modern psychology was first to articulate the concept of "wishful psychosis" in grief, a notion of temporary madness featuring wilfully conjured visions of the dead. A person who's lost someone might see the face of the beloved, hear their voice, notice the smell of their pipe or perfume, or simply be struck by a feeling of their presence. But such ghostly apparitions were diagnosed as fanciful yearnings by Freud, and warning signs of some

lingering dependency. He urged patients that the road to recovery necessitated a severing of the bonds with the dead. People had to move on and let go lest they remain forever stuck. And Freud's approach became the central model for grief recovery for the counselling profession since his time. Even though it may feel comforting in the moment to linger on visitations from the dead, you must realize this is all in your head, not real, and lingering in that space will hold back your healing toward wholeness.

But is this so?... Let's ponder this question as we dive into our scripture reading in search of some revelatory guidance. One of the things in the bible, and certainly in the book of Acts, is that visions and visitations from those who have died or of angels, or even angels representing the dead, are not only common, but taken very seriously. Visions and visitations are often important communications and connections, and often from God. God communicates through dreams and through angel messengers, and whether they are flesh and blood real or more like "ghostly apparitions" to quote Freud, they are equally significant, real and powerful communications for people who experience them. There is no hard break between the world of the physical and the world of the spiritual. Heaven is not in some far away place somewhere. Rather, heaven is all around us and simply another dimension of reality that sometimes penetrates our reality. The veil between here and there is thin.

Sadly, though, our western world has made the veil between here and there super thick, and we have been taught by a quasi-scientific world view to distrust any sensation, vision or visitation that may come to us from the other side. What would happen to us if we opened ourselves to the reality that heaven or the other realm, call it what you will, is as real as you and me physically in this space right now? Can anyone say for sure that only this, right here and right now, accessed with our senses as solid matter, is what's real and everything else is fake? Is the biblical world view simply "primitive" and therefore passe? Were ancient people simply backward and unenlightened as many non-western people in our world today who take the spiritual realm far more seriously as many of us European/North Americans?

Let's take a deeper dive into our scripture reading. There is persecution happening in the early days of the Christian movement. Disciples have already encountered the risen Christ, and people like Paul, Peter and Stephen the first martyr of the church, have encountered Christ speaking to them from "heaven" and his Spirit manifesting signs and wonders among them. They are open to all this and it is very real for them and very empowering too.

But there are also angel visitations. Are these angels real-life people? Sometimes they are. Are they also visitations and visions in their dreaming? Sometimes they are. Are such visions and visitations sometimes so vivid that it's not clear whether they are dreams or interactions with a physical presence when awake? Sometimes, yes. In our reading, Peter is not sure whether his angel is physically real or simply real in his dreaming. But whether the angel is a physical person or a spiritual presence makes the experience no less real for Peter. Obviously, the physical

reality is important if he is to get out of prison. Clearly some heavenly messenger, perhaps a guard moved by compassion and conviction, has engineered this middle-of-the-night escape at great risk to themselves. But here's the thing. Once Peter gets to the gate of the house where other friends are gathered, a servant named Rhoda simply hears Peter's voice. It's middle-of-the-night dark after all and she can't see a person there if anyone is actually physically there. She is so overjoyed to simply hear the voice she recognizes so well that she runs in to tell the others. And poor Peter is just left outside standing.

Is Peter physically there, though? The friends gathered in the house cannot believe he is physically there and simply assume that it is "his angel." Does that mean Peter has maybe died or that from his prison cell, in the middle of the night, suffering and alone, his presence as an angel comes to visit his friends? Clearly, for them, these are all real possibilities and not simply some hallucinatory or ghostly apparition. And once they supposedly let Peter or his angel in, Peter tells them that he is fine, to tell the other James who is leader of the Jerusalem church and other apostles and disciples that he is fine and ok, and then he disappears again in the middle of the night...

So what actually happened? Did the flesh and blood Peter actually show up at the house? Clearly for Rhoda and the people of the house, and for the author of Acts recounting this story, Peter was really there in person. Whether he was physically there or spiritually there for a few moments when multiple people experienced him there, doesn't matter. Peter was there period. They rejoiced because they knew he was free and would not die in prison. That's all they needed to know.

So what does this story tell us today? Is it just some fairy tale told in some historical-like way? Or are we being invited into a whole worldview foreign to us, a worldview that suggests there is a whole other dimension of reality and a whole other way of experiencing reality far richer and bigger than we often allow ourselves to imagine? Well, imagine if we were more open to the spiritual like this. And imagine what communication, insight, revelation, direction, assurance and peace we could derive if we trusted our visions and visitations?

The question is: how do we cultivate a greater openness to the spiritual in our lives? How much do we make a more attentive practice of prayer where we are asking and seeking and listening for God and God's messengers to speak to us? How alive is Christ above us and in us? How much do we feel the stirring of his Spirit as Holy Spirit convicting our conscience, upholding us in our struggles and comforting us with assurance in our grief? How open are we in our dreaming and waking to special visions and visitations from angels familiar to us and altogether new? And, how aware are we of the thin veil of the heavenly dimension and all those of the communion of saints that are all around us?... Let us pray:

Prayer: Grant us inner eyes to see and inner ears to hear, O God... Grant us openness of heart and faith in your gift of imagination... May we recognize angels physical and spiritual all around us and may we welcome our dead as alive and always with us – ancestors and siblings in the eternal communion of your everyday saints... Amen.