

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today's Gospel is without parallel in Scripture, but the one thing Luke is clearly trying to tell us, in this passage – above all else – is that the resurrected Jesus is not some wispy spirit, not some ghostly apparition from beyond the grave.

This Jesus is fully alive. This Jesus has come back from the grave, and he is flesh and bone. The risen Christ invites his incredulous followers to touch his hands and feet.

Before their very eyes, he eats; he chews and swallows a piece of fish – just the sort of detail an observant physician like Luke would typically notice! Luke takes great pains to demonstrate that the resurrection is real.

Show me, and I will believe. And that's what the world is saying to us today – even the people who don't come from the "show me" State of Missouri!

Our church could have the finest music in the world and the most well-executed worship service. We could have the best and most informative and inspiring website, and the best signage and print advertisements. We could send armies of volunteers out to ring doorbells.

But if we, as a congregation, fail to demonstrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ in our daily lives – if we fail to live as though new life truly matters – no one, but no one who's a guest with us is likely to ever walk through these doors a second time.

Don't just tell me, say our neighbors. Show me! And of no one is this truer these days than the younger generations. They really do want to know, "Is it virtual, or is it real?"

That's a question that comes to mind often today to those who watch television and movies. Were those lush landscapes, those death-defying stunts, those vast armies marching across the plain filmed with a conventional camera, with real actors?

Or were they created, or enhanced, on the motherboard of some special-effects computer? It's the same question, incidentally, that the younger generations are asking of us in the church today: Is it virtual, or is it real?

When you church people come together to sing those hymns, those songs all about how much you love God, do you do it for any reason other than just habit?

When you sit as you do to hear the pastor preach – usually longer now than nearly any segment between commercials on television; that's hard to do! – do you really listen to the words?

When you eat the bread and drink the wine, do you do it for any reason other than habit, or duty? Is it virtual? Or is it real?

Five or six years ago, when Pat and I were visiting our friends, Rhonda and Bill, in San Jose, California, we toured a mansion known as the “Winchester Mystery House.” Its construction was directed by a woman named Sarah Winchester, and she was the heiress to the Winchester firearms fortune.

This mansion is quite a tourist attraction today – even though it’s a rambling hodgepodge of different architectural styles. It’s a builder’s nightmare, but an eccentric’s dream. The Winchester Mystery House had its start in 1884, three years after Sarah’s husband had died of tuberculosis.

Speculation is that she was already depressed from the death of her only child, Annie, as an infant. Filled with grief, Sarah Winchester went to a séance and heard there a promise, spoken through a medium, that as long as she kept building her house, she would not face death.

Sarah Winchester believed that promise. She began with a home of eight rooms, but the project continued until she died, at the age of 82. The mansion eventually cost \$5 million dollars to build, and was begun at a time when construction workers earned, on average, one dollar and fifty cents a day.

Today the mansion has 160 rooms, including 40 bedrooms, two ballrooms, 47 fireplaces, over 10,000 panes of glass, 17 chimneys, two basements, and three elevators. When Sarah Winchester died in 1922, she left such a quantity of building materials behind that the workers could have continued on for many years.

Today her house stands as more than a tourist attraction. It is also a monument to the human dread of death. “Death has been swallowed up in victory,” writes the apostle Paul. “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (1 Cor. 15:55).

Would that Sarah Winchester had heard those words and truly believed them! Would that she could have trusted the testimony of those who heard the risen Christ say “Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have” (Luke 24:39).

That was no vision. That experience of the disciples was not virtual. The witness of Luke is clear: it was real. What could bring on such an incredible testimony? Only the real experience of touching his hands and feet, of feeling flesh and bone.

The great explorer, Ferdinand Magellan, was the first sea captain to sail around the world. Upon his return to Spain, not everyone believed him – including some powerful bishops and cardinals.

But Magellan did not allow the skeptics and detractors to deter him. Some say he replied with something like this: “The church says the earth is flat, but I know it is round. I have seen its shadow on the moon, and I have more faith in a shadow than in the church.”

So speaks that voice of experience. If that’s what Magellan actually said, then it’s likely the “shadow on the moon” was his watershed experience, one he threw back at those who doubted his word.

What is your “shadow on the moon;” what is your experience of the risen Christ? If you say you’re here simply out of habit, or out of family duty, or out of a desire to uphold ethical living, those are all answers which may not suffice for others seeking meaning and hope in a dark world.

In a place of total darkness, the only way to “see” is by touch. In this dark world of ours, the touch that matters most is the touch of the Risen Lord. He invites you, this day, to feel his touch in Word and Meal, to experience his love, to see that he is no mere illusion, no ghost, but a living presence in our midst. Come, let us together sing of the joy of his rising! Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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