

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA

April 14, 2024 – EASTER 3, YR. B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Jesus: The Real Deal*”\*

Acts 3:12-19	(A call to repent and turn to the Risen Christ for forgiveness)
Psalms 4	(A prayer to trust in the Lord)
1 John 3:1-7	(We are God’s children, through abiding in Jesus)
St. Luke 24:36b-48	(The Risen Christ meets and eats with His disciples)

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Imagine, just for a moment, that someone is planning to write your biography, a comprehensive, authoritative account of your life. What stories will they tell? Which ones would you want left out? As I reflected on today’s Gospel, I got to thinking about that question. There are certain details the author would *have* to include in my life story—if they were to truly understand who Nina George-Hacker is.

They would need to tell about my childhood and young adulthood spent all up and down the East Coast from Boston to Florida, and about my extensive family in Greece. They would have to chronicle how I first aspired to becoming a submarine captain, and after that, a lawyer or a psychologist, and that I eventually taught college-level philosophy—but quit to be an editor of social science books in New York publishing. (Oh, and had my own book published in 2023.)

Of course, the author would need to include my spiritual conversion and God calling me to serve as a pastor, my theological education, the churches I’ve served, about my being called to St. John’s Church, Compass, and the positive influence this parish family has had on me. And last, but not least, how I met Rick Hacker and got married at age 40.

But what stories would the biographer omit? Tales of my ex-boyfriends, youthful indiscretions, and various regrets? What about other important people in my life? Although some biographies are dictionary-sized volumes biographers still can’t include *everything*!

In my personal copy of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, the Gospels—the books that tell the story of Jesus’ life and ministry—take up a mere 108 pages. In fact, in that edition, the entire New Testament is only 238 pages long. Just imagine what got left out! St. John writes: “Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are *not* written in this book” (20:30, *emphasis added*).

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Gospel writers had to choose which stories to include, and which stories to leave out. They did so in order to tell a larger story, one that biblical scholars seek to discover, when they ask: Why was *this* story included? For example, in Jesus’ birth narrative, why did Luke tell the story about the shepherds, but not the wise men that Matthew includes? Why do Matthew, Mark and Luke say that Jesus was crucified on Passover, while John says it was the day *before* Passover? And why did Luke decide to tell the story we heard in today’s Gospel lesson and to narrate it in this particular way?

Just prior to today’s reading is the account of a couple making the seven-mile walk to Emmaus; their unknown encounter with Jesus; their recognition of Him as they began to eat; and their rush back to Jerusalem. Now, they are in the midst of telling the disciples they have seen the Risen Lord, when suddenly Jesus appears in their midst, and offers His now-familiar greeting, “Peace be with you.” They were all certain they were seeing a ghost. And why not? Jesus was dead!

Every one of them had either seen Him die on the Cross, or had heard of their Rabbi’s demise. Afterward, they had received the reports of the women who said they had gone to the tomb and found it empty—but the men did not believe them. Jesus was gone. It was time to get on with their lives. Then, these two show up, babbling that they had seen Jesus, actually talked with Him, even invited Him to stay for supper—and He did. Then, just when they realized who He was, “*Poof!*” He disappeared! Now you see Him, now you don’t! *Gone!*

Next, as they are talking, here is this apparition in their midst—without knocking on the door, without any announcement. Again, “*Poof!*” Now you *don’t* see Him, now you *do!* Just the kind of prank a ghost would pull. Rather unnerving, to say the least.

To prove that He really is their Crucified Lord, Jesus shows them His hands and feet. But after this, He does an even more astounding thing: He asks them for some fish—and He *eats it!* Now, eating fish, or fruit, or a good hamburger is not something even a gourmet ghost does! Which is precisely why St. Luke tells this story, and tells it this way.

The Evangelist includes this account, along with the crucial detail of Jesus munching on some fish, to help dispel a heresy that had begun to spread in the Early Church. What troubled the heretics *wasn’t* that Jesus had been resurrected. They had a problem with the notion that Jesus had truly died. Their argument went something like this: Jesus was God incarnate, God made flesh, God in human form. So what happens if the Creator of the Universe, the One who holds everything together, the source and sustainer of all life—dies? What happens to God? What happens to the universe? What happens to existence if God is no more?

And so, as a way of holding together their theology of the Incarnation and their understanding of the Cosmos, the heretics promoted the idea that Jesus only appeared to die. He didn’t really die because that’s not something God does! Others among them believed Jesus was never really human, but only appeared to be like us; while still others believed that just before He died, Jesus was transported to heaven, leaving behind the human shell He had been using.

The Docetists—who were declared heretics at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD—believed that since the physical world was evil, Jesus could not have had a human body, only the *appearance* of one. As such, He could not have died and been resurrected. Beliefs such as these later gained wide acceptance, even among other religions. For instance, the Qur’an, the scripture that is sacred to Islam, teaches that just before Jesus died, He changed places with Judas, and escaped into heaven.

At the time Luke was writing, these beliefs were starting to gain support. And so, with just one little story, with one little incident, Jesus saying, “Look at my hands and my feet—look at my body! And by the way, could I have some of that fish?” Luke makes the point that Jesus is real—real flesh, a real human, who was really dead, and is really risen.

At this point, you’re probably thinking, “Thanks for the history lesson, but so what? What do the Docetists and Muslim scholars and fifth-century heretics have to do with us?” The answer is: Everything! For you see, heresies are still alive and thriving!

One time, when I was still living in upstate New York, I stopped at a Dunkin’ Donuts in Albany, for some lunch. I was wearing my clergy collar after teaching a class at the College of St. Rose. The couple at the next table—who, I later found out, were Roman Catholics—saw me make the sign of the cross and pray briefly before eating. They asked if I was a nun. I explained that I’m an Episcopal priest, and we got to chatting. Eventually, the wife said, “Oh, I don’t believe Jesus was a man. I think he was a man *and* a woman.” *Pardon? Whaat?!*

Even some of our fellow Christians buy into the idea that Jesus is just a spiritual figure. They forget that He liked broiled fish! They overlook the fact that after His Resurrection, even though He was God and could have healed His wounded hands and feet, He left the scars to show His disciples so they would believe He was truly Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified, and that He had truly risen from the dead.

There is abundant evidence that America is becoming a less religious country—and one reason is because most people don’t believe that they can actually encounter the living God when they come to church. But how could our faith have meaning, how could that faith transform our lives or anyone else’s, if we were only following an avatar, a symbol, a ghost?

The fact that we follow a real Jesus, a living, breathing, eating, risen Lord is why this Gospel passage is here for us, both as individuals, and as a congregation, as followers of Christ. It is to remind us that our faith in a real Jesus must also come to life, in real, touchable actions. As the saying goes, “No one will care what we believe until they believe that we care.”

As we journey on through Eastertide, I invite you to discern prayerfully how you can more vividly demonstrate that your faith is not a ghostly specter, but rather, a faith that *has* life, *gives* life, and *shapes* life. In other words, how can you put flesh and bones to your faith? For Christ Himself has commissioned us, and sent us forth as witnesses, to tell, show, and *live out* that He is Risen! In the words of St. Francis of Assisi: “Preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.”

Now, once more, imagine that someone is writing the story of your life, of your faith. What would they say? What kind of story would they tell? Would it be a ghost story, one without substance? Or would they write about a living faith? Our stories are still being written by the Author of All Existence. With His help, we can determine what kind of story ours will be—and how it will end.

May God grant us the courage, the will, and the love, to be “flesh and bone” witnesses of Jesus Christ, our real and Risen Lord. \* *Amen.*

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\* Adapt. N. George-Hacker, 19 April, 2015, St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.

\* Adapt., Don Flowers, Jr. “Hands, Feet and Faith: Luke 24:36b–48, Year B - Third Sunday of Easter,” 19 April 2015, [NextSundayWorship.com](http://www.nextsundayworship.com) <<http://www.nextsundayworship.com/april-19-2015/>> 17 April 2015.