

Psalm 4

- ¹ Answer me when I call, O God of my right!
You gave me room when I was in distress.
Be gracious to me, and hear my prayer.
- ² How long, you people, shall my honor suffer shame?
How long will you love vain words, and seek after lies?
- ³ But know that the LORD has set apart the faithful for himself;
the LORD hears when I call to him.
- ⁴ When you are disturbed, do not sin;
ponder it on your beds, and be silent.
- ⁵ Offer right sacrifices,
and put your trust in the LORD.
- ⁶ There are many who say, "O that we might see some good!
Let the light of your face shine on us, O LORD!"
- ⁷ You have put gladness in my heart
more than when their grain and wine abound.
- ⁸ I will both lie down and sleep in peace;
for you alone, O LORD, make me lie down in safety.

Luke 24:36-48

³⁶ While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." ³⁷ They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. ³⁸ He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?" ³⁹ Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." ⁴⁰ And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. ⁴¹ While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" ⁴² They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³ and he took it and ate in their presence.

⁴⁴ Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶ and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things.

Monsters Under the Bed

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Psalm 4; Luke 24:36-48

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There's an old OLD nighttime children's prayer begun in the 18th century that reads like this:

Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord, my soul to keep,

And if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord, my soul to take.

Now that's a pretty horrific children's prayer if you ask me.

My daughter gets mad if I remind her to clean her room as she's going to bed.

My kids have always wanted security at night,

so I've not shared with them the notion that they could die and not wake up.

It goes alongside of other old nursery rhymes about rocking babies falling out of trees,

blind mice getting their tails cut off, and ring around the rosie –

a children's game about the black plague.

Cheery, eh?

Those folks from other centuries weren't fooling around.

They had a greater familiarity with death than we do.

If you lived on a farm, you knew that the chickens weren't just cute animals,

You wrung their necks for food.

If you lived in the city, you knew that disease and industry took a high toll on the community,

in life and limb.

There were real monsters. Real ghosts. Real horror stories.

You didn't need to read Steven King novels or watch slasher movies late at night to know fear.

In our own century, we haven't forgotten that the night amplifies our anxieties.

We pray before we go to sleep.

We continue the habit of pondering on our beds.

We wish we could re-do the past, and we worry about the future.

We think about everything that disturbs and distresses us.

And late at night our thoughts turn to God.

We've been doing that since biblical times – and probably before.

The fourth psalm is an evening prayer.

It seeks solutions and makes supplications for the trials and tribulations of the day.

It reflects on human shame, and vanity, and lies.

It demands answers from God – the God who has offered spaciousness before –

When it felt like the world was closing in – as it does – at 2 a.m.

In the night, in the darkness, can we remember?

Can we remember the gladness that enters our hearts because of God?

Can we feel safe when we lie down and sleep in peace?

In **peace**... that word.

The peace that escapes us.

The peace that surprises us.

The peace that is really real and not merely a ghost.

We long for that kind of peace in our lives.

Because we know that our fears are also founded in fact.

Even with more of our friends and family getting vaccines, COVID isn't over.

The new variant is even worse. Hospitals are crowded again.

The news reminds us that schools and Fed Ex offices still aren't safe from men who release their anger and shame by pulling a trigger.

And Black folks still have much to fear from being pulled over by police.

And the political and economic division in our nation continues to widen the gulf between the "sides."

My brain can get very busy at night with thoughts to keep me awake.

But will thoughts of who God is bring me comfort?

This post-resurrection narrative in Luke, meant to assure us of Jesus' presence, feels like it's getting to something very real to me even in its strangeness.

It resonates with me that they were afraid first.

Is this a ghost?

Is this a zombie?

What kind of monster thriller were the disciples in exactly?

Coming back from the dead is usually a significant twist in any plotline.

He asks them why they are afraid. Really Jesus? This surprises you.

I know that Jesus talked about all those times when he would be back after his death.

I'm not sure if the disciples talked among themselves about that, but that's pretty weird.

Sometimes I don't think we honor how actually strange it was because we have heard the story so many times.

And yet, Jesus does try to quickly restore a sense of peace in this scenario,
a sense of normalcy in an otherwise unbelievable event.

He asks the disciples to look at him, to touch him, to give him food to eat.

That's what we do when we comfort a loved one who has just had a nightmare, right?

We assure them of our presence, give them a hug, maybe a glass of water, or a snack.

Life is hard, nightmarish sometimes.

In every century, death is known to us, even if now it tends to be hidden away in hospitals.

What remains familiar is our wish to deny it, or delay it, or outrun it.

Perhaps sleep is our preparation for death.

We have to give in to it – or else go crazy.

To trust our bodies to sleep can feel like trusting our bodies to God.

Now I lay me down to sleep... and you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety.

Praying, meditating, making time to ease one's mind before sleep is important.

Falling asleep with the news on the TV or scrolling on our devices isn't very restful.

God gives us room when the world closes in.

Jesus shows up to give us peace when the world has fallen apart.

Our minds can become closed and rigid, hardened by the wickedness of the world.

And the Spirit of the living God is there to open them, to remind us how the stories end,

And that we don't need to be so afraid.

For the most part, as a church, our worship is typically in the morning.

Waking up to a new day is a time for praise to be sure.

But sometimes I long for more evening prayer, more of the gathering that allows us to experience peace and trust - together.

When I was taking the Spiritual Direction course at Richmond Hill, one of the things I most looked forward to was Compline, the ritual of nighttime prayer that shows up in the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer.

That time was softer, darker, quiet, and didn't involve such deep thinking or call to action.

It was a call to sleep, a call to rest, a call to let go – to give up the anxieties of the day - and give one's trust to the deeper ways of God's world.

The prayers and readings included ones like Psalm 4 – with assurances of God's protection – and reminders of God's peace.

At the end of it – we prayed a particular refrain - sometimes three times:

Guide us waking, O Lord, and guard us sleeping; that awake we may watch with Christ, and asleep we may rest in peace.

Asleep, may we rest in peace.

I know I need that prayer. Maybe you need that prayer too.

There's nothing like a sleepless night to remind you of how important sleep can be.

The Bible reminds us to rest – when American culture tends to shun rest for productiveness in a myriad of ways.

So, I'm going to encourage you to be biblically countercultural this week and take a nap.

When the cat or dog lays down in your lap, let them – for as long as they want.

Those animals in our lives can teach us about rest.

Rest renews us and refreshes us. It may even be what teaches us about God's peace.

Let go of whatever monsters, ghosts, and zombies are creating fear and anxiety for you,

And rest in God's love and support. This night. And every night. Amen.