

*36While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." 37They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. 38He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? 39Look 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." 40And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. 41While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" 42They gave him a piece of broiled fish, 43and he took it and ate in their presence. 44Then 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." 45Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, 46and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, 47and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48You are witnesses of these things. 49And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."*

I remember a Sunday afternoon. I don't know what had happened that Sunday morning but I remember so vividly being in my car, driving west out of the small town in North Dakota in which I lived. I remember a deep desire within me to go to Montana.

I have never been to Montana. I know almost no one who lives there. But I sensed that if I drove off into Montana I would be free - free of my failures - free of my responsibilities - free of my past and my relationships - just free.

All the people of Heaven's Gate wanted that kind of free. They thought their suicide would be the path to that being free. They had freed themselves from family, from their own sexuality, finally freed themselves from life itself.

Have you ever felt yourself drawn by such an illusion, a Montana, a heaven's gate? Through the years I have buried many who have committed suicide, many more that simply lost the will to live. Many of us are strongly drawn to just being free of it all.

At first glance Jesus seems to promise just that: being free. "You will know the truth and the truth will make you free," he said.

Maybe we can just crawl off into a corner with Jesus. Seal off the world and the pain in our hearts, Jesus and me, until in death we escape from flesh and fly off as spirit to be with God.

Maybe we could live in a soul existence alongside of our body existence, your soul the real you, your body only a shell, an illusion.

Montana. Escape from all the entanglements of life in the flesh. Freedom.

Jesus escaped. His death on the cross ended his day to day life of being pursued by needy people, and disciples seeking glory. His death on the cross ended his being opposed and attacked by the religious leaders.

Jesus escaped. Or did he?

When he appeared among his disciples, they thought he was a ghost, a spirit. But he said to them, "Look at my hands, my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch and see, for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." He took a piece of broiled fish and ate in their presence.

It is I myself - not some spirit that has escaped, but Jesus, all of him.

"These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you - that everything written in the law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled."

Jesus life, even beyond death was still connected to the whole history of God's people.

And the future of God's people for he said to them: "Thus it is written that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things."

The way so many tell it this would have been the moment for Jesus to tell us all about heaven. He had crossed over into death, a vivid description of that crossing and joys awaiting us there, now that would have really lined up the followers. So many since Jesus have wanted to make him all about that.

But Jesus showed them his flesh, his hands, his feet. Jesus pointed them into the history of God's people in this world, into the future of God's people in this world.

God is not over there, in Montana. God is here, in your life, and in this church, and in your family. Jesus came and suffered and was raised, not to give you a way of escaping but so that repentance and forgiveness of sins might be preached in his name.

This week I attended a conference on Forgiveness in a Violent Society. Terry Anderson spoke of being a hostage for 7 years and of forgiving his captors. Debbie Morris, who at age 16 was kidnapped and raped by the man who was the subject of the movie, "Dead Man Walking", spoke about forgiving the men who abducted and violated her. But most of the conference dealt with forgiveness that is much more difficult than the forgiveness they have given.

Surprisingly the subject was forgiveness in our families. For so many of us the deepest pain in our hearts is from our growing up years, pain so deep that many are not even able to look at it. Pain we have had inflicted upon us, pain we have inflicted. I suspect a great many of the suicides at Heaven's gate were connected to that pain.

Jesus provides us with the power to forgive, the power to be forgiven. Life is ours not just the other side of the grave but here in the flesh. Jesus gives you the power to be healed - to forgive - to be whole.

Jesus is that power to forgive, to repent, to change even in your own home.

Someday we will die. What God has prepared for us there will then belong to us.

But now, this day Jesus is here in his flesh and his blood to give you life here and now and to be alive in the very places where you live. Amen.