

## UNEXPLAINED PHENOMENON - PART TWO

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Last week in the spirit of Halloween I took a break from what we might instinctively consider more respectable subject matter to provide a cursory description of what I thought were the best, unexplained creatures and phenomenon in the world. From angels to unicorns, we asked ourselves what we thought were the most plausible of the improbable, mysterious, and unexplained. In an effort to be true to the mysterious spirit of the topic, I left the sermon unfinished—a cliffhanger, if you will. People shared their own personal opinions and experiences with the things that live outside easy explanation.

I think the unknown is big fun. However, what can feel kind of “woo-woo,” campy, and absurd at the start can pretty quickly turn serious, divisive even. Opinions run strong in the area of ghosts, aliens, and angels, with the implications being very religious. The truth is the challenge of sorting myth from reality is deeper than a Halloween costume.

You might initially get a “Get out of here,” or better, “Who hired him again” look when you bring up any of questions such as “Do you believe in aliens,” but why? Despite the circus-like bearded lady quality of our topic, these are deeply spiritual and important questions. How one thinks, or should think, about the fact that throughout history humans have believed that they have seen ghosts, had psychic experiences, and seen monsters and creatures we cannot scientifically verify, is a very religious question. And such a question cannot, will not, be raised in most churches to shed some scrutiny, or even worse, shed comparison on some of the nearest and dearest held articles of faith.

So as odd a topic as this is for a sermon, I walk away feeling it a bit of a shame that it is not. First, because culturally, in the collective at least, these subjects obviously entrance us. And second, because the answers are not so simple. And if more than some of the most learned people on the planet postulate that at least one of the correct answers to what remained unexplained is “yes,” then doesn’t it make limiting our religious wonder to our historic sacred scriptures seem a little small minded? I think the answer is yes.

It was interesting to ponder these mysteries over the last month, this sequence of sermons taking me what felt like forever to finish. Depending on the skill of the argument, I found myself swayed as to what I thought was true. I’m not alone. NPR’s radio program “This American Life” asked an engaged audience of adults whether unicorns are extinct or endangered. The very way the question was phrased was the key part of a long full and rich conversation. I understand how that can happen. The *most compelling of the world’s unexplained phenomenon, have both a natural, “how could it be true?” and “how could it not be” quality to them.* Today, Bigfoot, the Lochness Monster, Aliens, UFOs, crop circles, and ghosts receive special consideration.

You might think me absurd to take two back-to-back Sundays to deal with questions most think are quirky, and it is a bit odd for a Sunday Service topic. However, they are not as silly as they are real questions. If the mysteries we are engaging were not both compelling and unsettled, how could it be that so many people, from so many cultures and generations, cared.

For example, with over one thousand recorded sightings of the Lochness monster on file how it could be that there not be something special in those deep waters a good, real, important question. And yet flip the question over, and where one trains their scrutiny, and the tone changes. When the question of how, in a finite body of water that has been the focus of myth for a thousand years, and of modern attention for over a century, there could still be no hard evidence of a sea-serpent if there was one, changes what feels improbable.

I lean skeptic, pretty hard in fact. Nevertheless, I have no answer that explains my friend back home in Massachusetts, a sober woman in her 60s who, before Google maps, was on a land line phone call with a psychic in California. And this psychic—who among other claims suggested she was able to see things psychically from a distance—asked my friend Chantal if her house was the one with the red sled under the porch. It of course was.

What should I do with the uncannily accurate list of things that the psychic told her about her husband (whom she had never met), and who before the phone call never even knew their names? Explain how that is wishful thinking.

What can and should we do with the consistent history of people in all times and places, like our own Shannon Koresh who last week bravely claimed having psychic experiences. More importantly, what could, and should, we do with the psychics that have said amazing seemingly unknowable things to many of us in this room? What do I, as a pastor, say to those of you who have had those experiences, when I have not?

How could they all be delusions, frauds, or misunderstandings? Or, how, given what how we know about science and cognition, could they be real? I want you to begin to feel the pressure that builds between these two positions. We might all agree to a hands-off respectful position of tolerance around what any of us agree. Those here last week saw the near universal hands up vote for that kind of mutual respect. So, assuming and nearly demanding that, let's play some more in the sandbox of the explained.

If they are not delusions, frauds, or misunderstandings, how could it be that magician and skeptic "The Great" Randi," who decades ago put up a million-dollar prize to anyone who could provide a scientifically verifiable demonstration of paranormal powers, has had no winners and few challengers. It doesn't make sense.

How could it be that there is not one single example of a psychic, not one past life experience, not one act of telekinesis, or astrological reading, that has passed the scrutiny of science as real. Not one. That seems unlikely. Yet, given all we believe we understand about the laws of nature, how could ghosts be real? In a world where nobody talks about believing in Zeus anymore, or is afraid of a Minitour sneaking up to gore them, how could it be that ghosts still be part of the lexicon and popular imagination? Why, seriously.

As for most of the creatures on our survey list from last week that included, if you remember, leprechauns, giants, mermaids, the answer is most definitively no. Animals with superpowers, or hybrid body parts, almost fail the instinctive test of plausibility.

But if you would hardly dare say you believe in Santa Claus, Pegasus, or the tooth fairy, what keeps Bigfoot, the Loch Ness Monster, aliens, ghosts, UFOs, and crop circles with a cadre of strong advocates? Today all this deserves and receives a little more attention.

Who says church is dull.

### **Big Foot**

Do I believe any one of the big hairy upright humanoids dubbed Bigfoot and or Yeti exist in the Pacific Northwest, or Himalayas? I'm a pretty strong ninety-five percent "No!"

The ten percent of me that leans "Yes"—with a hopeful "Wouldn't it be cool" added for good measure—is rooted in the fact that although very quickly less and less of the world remains unexplained, we still discover new animals all the time.

Just weeks after a WWF report identified at least fifty-two new species of animals and plants on Borneo, scientists discovered that a leopard found on the island, as well as on Sumatra, is an entirely new species of cat.



That cat, by the way, would be the beautiful Clouded Leopard which although rumored to exist by native populations and scientifically described in an early 1800s British naturalist journal was only 12 years ago confirmed to exist in Borneo. However, this big and cute kitty-cat is not alone in eluding detection.

Likewise, the jungle dwelling Saola (seen here) was just found.



Long described as the "Asian unicorn" for its elusive nature, the Saola, was only confirmed in recent decades as not being a myth. This deer-like creature that lives deep in the jungles of Vietnam was first discovered, or better, confirmed, by the discovery of a skull in the 1990s, then in just 2010 it was first photographed here in its natural habitat.

It is not just big cats and small deer that have eluded human confirmation. The reclusive Okapi, was



confirmed by western scientific sources to actually exist in 1901, but had not been seen anywhere near its general region of discovery between 1959 and 2006. That's a pretty big animal to go missing for forty-seven years, right? Are Bigfoot and the Loch Ness monster possibly much different? Maybe?

I hold out a five percent chance that one of the accounts people claimed to have had with Bigfoot is real in part because neither violates any deeply held principals. Besides, scientists know that as recently as one hundred thousand years ago a large Asian ape called Gigantopithecus roamed Asia.



Now if that creature above is not identifiable as a Bigfoot, then I am not a real minister. Wait. Don't consider that question. I hold out a slim five percent chance Bigfoot exists, or at least recently could have, because thirty thousand years ago we Homo sapiens still shared Europe with Neanderthals, who were a little bigger and tougher than us were there.

But despite all the pictures or film that have presumably been taken of Bigfoot, like the famous one known as the Patterson film, even ones of Bigfoot taken in the actual presence of official public authorities, let's not get to "woo-woo."



I am ninety-five percent convinced that Bigfoot is a myth because of the hard to ignore fact that there has been NO concrete verifiable physical evidence ever found. Nothing, no DNA, hair, or bones from a creature nearly always described as being at least seven feet tall and over four hundred pounds leans reason against the claim that it is real. Although a small breeding population of Bigfoot is possible, it is far more likely that Bigfoot is an equally amazing collaboration of hoax, mythic storytelling, delusion, and misunderstanding that fuels itself.

### The Lochness Monster

Likewise, and for roughly the same reasons, I'm voting a ninety-five percent no on the, or a, Lochness Monster too. Like Bigfoot, beyond a few grainy pictures, there seems not really much evidence to support the over one thousand reported sightings in the last seventy-five years alone. Add to that the fact that "Nessie" lives in a land-locked lake that prior to its short ten thousand years of existence as fresh water was, for the twenty thousand years prior, solid ice. In 2003, the BBC conducted the largest ever search for Nessie, using six hundred sonar beams and satellite tracking to explore the loch and its supposed most famous resident. I don't need to tell you that the researchers found nothing. Add to that, the most famous pic, of Nessie, this one below, was determined/or rumored by at least some to have been a hoax made of rubber gives me all the doubt I need. All this makes the opportunity for a population of freshwater sea monsters large enough to breed unlikely.



However, it is a principal of science itself that it can never fully disprove a negative. Scientists can only explore the possibility to the degree it seems practical. So, it is possible that a yet undiscovered freshwater creature or some known creature whose size has been exaggerated exists, but it is not likely.

### Ghosts

On Ghosts I am also a No. A stronger one than even my above Nos. The first and main reason being that accepting that ghosts exist violates a number of the laws of physics and biology that define the very way we view the world. This is of course a dull and safe answer. When examining the plausibility of anything that undermines multiple accepted scientific theories about how the world works, it should and does mean that the hurdle of proof is higher than confirming that yet one more undiscovered or confirmed species happens to be true.

Secondly, there is with the titillation of most unexplained phenomenon, obviously a motive to believe in ghosts. Whether you think ghosts are scary or the visitation of loved one's past, ghosts validate the general human longing that there is a life and realm beyond this one, which is one of humanitie's historically chief comforts and instincts. Because humans fear death, are more than intrigued by the possibility of another life, and also simply love a good story, when dealing with death, ghosts help. I'm ninety-eight percent no on ghosts.

### Aliens

On Aliens, I, and far, far, far, more importantly, science, casts its first and only vote of yes, or more accurately, a "probably." If technically any level of undiscovered life on other planets qualifies as

"alien," then I am almost certainly a believer. However, even if the standard for what would truly qualify as an "Alien" would be a complex intelligent life form, perhaps something resembling a little green man, even then, I think they exist.

This "faith" is confirmed by the fact that the scientific community has put its money where its mouth is. On any given day at the SETI Institute (the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence), one hundred thirty of the world's top scientists from every discipline imaginable are engaged in the search for life out in the universe. *There is no team of scientists one tenth of that size examining the Northern California woods for a big bi-pedal ape.*

Secondly, I answer yes because if you keep the scope of the universe in mind, it really is an act of hubris to think we are the sole planet, if not the sole species of highly intelligent life. Quite frankly, part of any proper faith in aliens is rooted in the way we struggle mentally to hold onto how big the universe is. *I want everyone to take a second to think about how big they imagine the universe to be. You're wrong. It's bigger than that.*

But if the world's size is a reason to believe intelligent life is a likelihood, the world's size and age is a reason to doubt we are in contact with them.

Which brings us to UFOs, and crop circles. *I desperately want to lean yes. Damn, I really do. But I can't. I want to vote that at least one account of the multiple encounters people have reported seeing is of a craft that did not originate on Earth is true. Sadly, the skepticism that has been bred into me from examining the other improbable unexplained phenomenon means I will wait for better evidence on UFOs and Crop Circles. Certainly, it is possible that between the time Ezekiel saw his flying wheels, to the time the Central Americans carved the seemingly helmeted characters on the side of a Central American pyramid, to our contemporary sun soaked desert dwellers near area 51 looking into the night sky saw a weird set of lights, at least one account is true. I can't quite do that. The absolute vastness of space, and the challenges of any species to travel the distances, between planets, when played against our deep, rich, and historic capacity to delude ourselves makes me cast a sad vote of ninety percent not likely.*

*In assessing the likelihood of aliens, and wondering about contact, we have to remember that these alien civilizations we seek would have to correspond in time with us. That means that for there to be any contact between us humans who have been recording history for only about the last six thousand years, for us to make contact with those cute or not-so-cute aliens, those aliens not only have to exist, but correspondingly time themselves with us, and be advanced enough to get here, in ways we have not yet figured out.*

Even if we know that there are likely technologies we have not yet discovered which will speed our travel through space, those exotic science fiction solutions that solve the problems of travel via wormholes and folds in space still likely require the use of exotic matter that has only been hypothesized. We know little, and aliens may know much more, about the practical means of such space travel. That remains an unknown, but a distinct possibility. Still, science tells us, or me, (I am after all taking their word on it) that it takes crazy amounts of energy and time to cross or even possibly leap the distances we are talking about.

Eventually, it should be said that complex clarifying questions like would aliens have to be contemporaries of us humans, to qualify for a yes, or would any discovered but now extinct complex life forms qualify as a yes, need to be asked. And, of course, to make matters more complex in a universe so vast that it is best measured by the number of years it takes light to travel somewhere, exactly when something exists or doesn't becomes its own unique issue.

The same concerns about the probability of UFO's being able to get here, or us there, naturally of course applies to crop circles. Although many of them are simply so stunning that they almost demand a near extraterrestrial or divine explanation. Take a look. (Mia, show Crop Circles)

However, if we are going to dismiss the likelihood of space travel from aliens, we likewise have to likewise dismiss crop circles as artwork created from beyond our atmosphere. Sadly, we likely have a few hidden Michelangelo farmers who have found their calling as artists and hoaxsters. But, who you never know. So, aliens yes most likely, UFOs and crop circles being the work of aliens or originating in space, a reluctant not likely.



### We Are an Invisible Variable

With extensive examples across history of people claiming to have seen Bigfoot, Nessie, UFOs, ghosts, and yet no verifiable, conclusive evidence that would bring any of these experiences or creatures into the far duller and bigger category of amazing things in or about the world that do exist, it begs attention be paid to the variable we don't initially want to consider. That being us.

See, I'm not sure that any of our cool unexplained phenomenon do or not exist. As I tell people all the time, I'm a UU, I'm not really sure of anything, except this. What I am sure of is that our minds are not reliable recorders or reporters of information. And I am sure that trapped a bit in our own experience, in our own minds, we collectively want to forget that we too are a variable in the equation. The main reason I am more comfortable dismissing the so, so, so many claims of seeing remarkable things than believing them is because we want to trust that what we experience is real. And we have learned the hard lesson that we can't.

We can't because as a species we're smart, sometimes remarkably so, but even when we are being earnest and truthful, we are not trustworthy. In part this is because we forget how young we are at critical thinking. In fact, our study of history can actually distract us to the truth that we have really only been really good at critical thinking for, oh, roughly five hundred years, and that is still only a portion of us. We are young in spirit, scrutiny and mind. The Renaissance and scientific method having been in any way incorporated into our thinking a few generations ago, we are young. Absorb these few facts. It took us over two hundred thousand years to reach a billion people, that date being very close to 1800, which means that in the last two hundred and twenty years we have added another six plus billion people to the planet. Remember that in that two hundred and twenty years, this side of the printing press, we invented basically everything we now see and know. We forget that half the humans ever to have ever lived to now have been born after 1900, most of them remaining nearly uneducated. Given our youth, it makes sense that we are prone to adolescent delusions.

The world that birthed our species was a brutal one with a constant threat of hunger, thirst, disease, and predators. We were, for the sake of a more polite term, more animals than we are now. That is a fact, and evolutionarily speaking those who believed they saw more dangerous things that were not there fared better than those who stopped to question what might be behind that rustle of the leaves. It simply was more genetically advantageous to think there was something there in the bushes than was *not there* than to miss *the something* that was. Imagination is in our genes.

Our brains quite simply by the process of evolution became both suspicious and creative. Said a *different way, the skepticism that gets us closer to the truth today was not what kept us alive in the past.* That means that because our brains have evolved to be over-cautious, even our modern human brain is inclined to see and hear things that are not there. With this in mind, does not our inclination to turn the things we hear go bump in the night into things that defy reason have a bit more rational, psychological explanation.

*We all know that young children predictably talk about the spooky things in the closet. I myself had my own fears. Every night, with the lights all on, I had to scan a corner of my closet for the Boogeyman. For a week after seeing Jaws as a seven-year-old I worried to the point of losing sleep and refusing to get up to use the bathroom afraid that there was a giant shark living under my bed. There was not one. Only the Boogeyman was there. I jest.*

But it is not *just kids and it is not just our rational minds.* If the conscious mind wakes before the brain reactivates motion, we can feel paralyzed, and the subconscious seeks a reason. Sometimes, this physiological experience is imagined to be an entity holding the person down. Frequently to those with UFO's on the brain, it is an alien abduction. However, it is not just invasive little green men, this condition of feeling trapped and held has been a documented experience throughout history, with always a different monster being present. Knowing this, most likely the demons labeled in the dark ages, are the aliens of modern times.

Have we not for eons, up to my 2<sup>nd</sup> to last trip to Hermosa's Comedy club all been dumbfounded by magicians. It is now also a well-documented fact that we cannot reliably pick criminals -we have hours ago watched commit a crime-out of a line-up. So, as much as it might spoil our faith in our own experience, if recent eye-witness's accounts to crimes don't regularly stand up to our reality checks, is it not hard to take seriously anyone who believes they were abducted last night in their sleep.

Our brains quite simply are created and programmed in interesting ways to both see and overlook amazing at seeing patterns that aren't actually there Our brains are odd. In their own unique way, they are both programmed to go to sleep for that which is predictable, and are incapable of seeing what has yet to be defined. The more, and more deeply we have images of Jesus or Mary on our brains, the more reports there will be that their face appears in a cookie or a cloud. Given this, shouldn't it be of any surprise that the amount of UFO's dramatically increased, almost statistically came into existence with the invention of our own flying aircraft.

We think spectacularly, but not accurately. We do this in part because we see things in categories and as groups. For example, there is no such thing as a triangle around Bermuda, it's a construct. There is no such thing as the United States, or the border with Mexico, but it is hard not to see a blank map and not fill in the lines of countries and borders. Likewise, our minds get used to seeing things from the perspective that they grow accustomed to seeing them.



Add our instinct to see what is not there, and define in culturally patterned ways what isn't exactly clear, the mix a culture of scary Hollywood movies, and various religious sensibilities that assume and

validate the existence of ghosts, spirits, angels and other paranormal phenomenon, and it goes a long way to answering where we are at.

Given that cognitive pre-disposition, is really a stretch to imagine that with enough conditioning as to what Bigfoot looks like, we see the Sasquatch behind when it was not there. All that means is that when things go bump in the night, it's a ghost. When things go bump in the woods, it's Bigfoot, and on down. Our minds are tools built to fill in and replace the content of what happened with a story that fits our prior narrative. This is why, with the best of intentions, we send people to their death for the crimes that we are sure we watched them commit, only to find out later that they were not even present at the scene.

Could it be that the origins, the seeds of our belief in Bigfoot, are rooted in the stories our ancestors passed down orally about encounters with these now extinct large apes? Or we created myths about such creatures we never met in real time, but dreamed up after finding the bones of a Gigantopithecus? Yes. Might such a sequence of the undocumented discovery of pterodactyl bones, archeology be the reason dragons are part of our mythic consciousness? Yes.

Science suggests we struggle to acknowledge these instincts to think outside what we truly are experiencing because we are trapped in, well, our own experience. Being trapped in our own experience we naturally forget that our minds are less like recording devices than meaning makers. We desperately don't want to believe that the world we see is one of a fiction-writers and not that of a reporter. It violates our sensibilities, but we're probably wrong.

The World is filled with wonder as it is.

But a pause is required. Whether these wonders exist or do not exist, wouldn't they only be new wonders among other wonders. It is important to remember that part of what turns our head, part of what makes such questions interesting, is simply because they are unconfirmed. Certainly, ghosts and angels if they ever were confirmed to be part of a reality beyond our own minds and experience would be truly paradigm shaking, but is a reclusive mountain or forest ape-man ridiculous? No! It's not. If a unicorn is obviously the product of overly imaginative minds, from a more ignorant time, why are there Narwhales?



Moreover, although I believe most accounts of the above are either delusions, frauds, or misunderstandings, there is no need to shame people for thinking things are real when they are not. This is not as simple as the scoff of us rational types might imply. The truth is, the world is filled with nearly as many counter intuitive things we know to be true than the things it rejects. Ask yourself, is the Lochness Monster really any more interesting than a giant squid, except that one hasn't washed up on the shores of that deep Scottish lake? Ask yourself, if many species can change colors almost instantaneously species, and a few can swap genders as necessary, is a werewolf ridiculous? Is a fire-breathing dragon much more absurd than a skunk?



If we didn't regularly encounter spiders, how fanciful would it be to imagine up creatures that excrete an ornate string that it used as both a trap for food and its chief means of transportation? How truly absurd a thought are mermaids if there is a species of fish that has lived so long in the deep dark ocean that it evolved a light suspended out from its forehead out half its body length?

But beyond creatures, our understanding of the universe is not that simple either.

Ask yourself, what is crazier, a God that starts humankind by pulling a rib out of the first man to create a woman, or explaining that we are genetically ninety-eight percent chimpanzee? What's weirder, a bodyless creator who started the world by uttering the phrase, "Let there be light," a world believed to rest on the back of a turtle, or a fourteen-billion-year-old universe that popped to being from an impossibly dense seed? Let's never forget that what's real is actually crazy too.

I had not expected to find the more traditionally spiritual mysteries the least likely. The most easily explained away. I had not exactly expected that. I had never articulated to myself, that I believed way more in the possibility of Bigfoot existing, or aliens were now or had visited us than I do that Jesus was either born of a virgin or resurrected from the dead. Articulating that surprised me.

We may now have a capacity for critical thinking that we never had before, but have no fear, we don't half understand the world yet. Miracles await, and a bit of humility looks good with every philosophy.

Let's be the critical minds and loving hearts the world needs us to be.

We have to remember it is possible that the universe could work in ways we don't yet, or perhaps will ever, understand. Bigfoot could be behind that tree.

**Amen**