

The Elusive Presence

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The Third Sunday of Easter
Holy Communion
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Acts 2:14a, 22-24, 36-42; 1 Peter 1:17-25; Luke 24:13-35

“Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.” -- Luke 24:31

“Dearly beloved, the Gospel tells us that on the first day of the week, when Jesus had been raised from death, he sat at table with two of his disciples and was made known to them in the breaking of the bread.”

Many of you will recognize those words as the invitation to our monthly communion service, and I'll be repeating those words in just a few minutes. Some of you, I'm sure, have also figured out that our communion invitation is based on this morning's reading from Luke, that lovely story of Jesus's appearance to two of his followers as they were making their way to Emmaus.

The six Sundays after Easter are a funny time in the church year. They're technically called Eastertide or the second through the seventh Sundays of Easter, and one of the things that makes them funny is those stories of Jesus after his resurrection, like this morning's reading from Luke.

Those post-resurrection appearances, as New Testament scholars like to call them, are a mixture of the pedestrian and the surreal, so that we're always caught a little off-balance when we read them.

All four of the evangelists – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – go their own way in telling us what Jesus's followers experienced with him after his death, but what they all agree on is two things: (1) that Jesus's followers did experience him as alive with them after his death; and (2) that the life he lived with them after his death was not the same life he had lived with them before his death. That's the double-barreled message from the evangelists after Easter.

That's what last week's reading from John was telling us, by saying the Jesus was in the midst of his disciples even though the doors of the house were locked, and it's what Luke is telling us today by saying that when the two disciples recognized Jesus he vanished from their midst. People don't just appear in locked rooms, and they also don't disappear while they're in the midst of supper. This post-resurrection Jesus is both the same Jesus and a very different Jesus from the teacher and healer his disciples knew while he was alive.

That same-but-not-the-same identity of Jesus is also what all the evangelists are telling us when they say that Jesus's closest followers, like Mary Magdalene, don't recognize him after his resurrection. Whatever form Jesus took after his resurrection, it wasn't simply his old body resuscitated. Resurrection is not resuscitation, and we can't remind ourselves of that fundamental tenet of Christian belief too often. We'll completely misunderstand what new life in Christ means if we think of it as simply our old life restored. New life is just that – it's new.

And that's why the presence of Christ is so elusive to us. We have trouble living new lives. We have trouble enough living our old lives well, but living new lives is yearning impossible for most of us. A priest friend of mine says we're not really living resurrection lives, and I think he's right. We're living our old, ordinary selves but wanting the world to be different. That's a naïve hope. The world will be different when we're different, and we have a long way to go and a lot of work to do before we're radically different from the world, not simply in what we say, but especially in what we do. The presence of Christ in our lives is elusive – it comes and goes, just as it did for those two disciples making their way to Emmaus. The evangelists are telling us to get ready for that reality.

One of the Easter treats I look forward to most is seeing the new Easter outfits at Easter breakfast. Easter clothes used to be a much bigger deal than they are now, because most of us can go out and buy a new outfit whenever we want. But when I was a kid – and I'm sure this is true for many of you as well – we didn't buy new clothes throughout the year. We bought new clothes three times a year: at Easter, just before school started in September, and at Christmas. And those Easter outfits were far and away the most impressive. In those days, they involved hats and gloves as well as dresses and shoes for the women, and suits and ties and maybe new shirts for the guys. We don't go quite that far these days – although I'd be delighted if any of you decided to start wearing hats and gloves again on Easter – but there were some of us still preserving that Easter tradition a couple of weeks ago.

But the old advertising slogan notwithstanding, it takes more than the clothes to make the person. The presence of the risen Jesus Christ in our lives can't be put on and taken off at will. To love God with all your heart and mind and strength, and to love your neighbor as you love yourself – in other words, to embody the loving presence of the risen Jesus Christ – you have to change dramatically, inside and out. Or rather, you have to allow yourself to BE changed dramatically, inside and out. You have to let the reality of Christ's resurrection seep into you, into the core and center of you, and then you have to practice – many times a day, every single day – acting out of that core, so that living a God-shaped life becomes second nature to you. Living from a Christ-formed core is a habit, a reflex. That's what it means to be raised to new life with Christ. That's what it means to be saved – not in some life to come, but in this life and this world, where salvation is so desperately needed.

Of course, this is a very different understanding of salvation from the view held by the majority of Christians, who understand salvation to be spending eternity in a place called heaven with Jesus. There's a new movie out dealing with that idea, and if it brings you comfort to think of heaven as a place in the same way that Toledo is a place, where you're going to meet all your dead relatives except the ones you don't like, then okay, go with it.

But to do that, you're going to have to make up some stuff about heaven, on the one hand, and leave out big chunks of Scripture that don't support that kind of theology, on the other, like today's reading from Luke, where it's clear that the resurrection life is not simply this life writ large and for some future date.

The presence of the risen Jesus Christ vanishes as soon as we recognize it – that is, think we have our minds around it – and that vanishing point is God's way of telling us not to make heaven in our image. Mystery abounds in the Christian faith, and a lot of Christians can't live with mystery, and so we chuck the mystery and replace it with hard-boiled doctrine, on the one hand, or a sentimentalized version of Disneyworld, on the other.

Resist those temptations, friends, in this Eastertide, and grow into a mature faith –

a faith that accepts that God's presence in the world is both real and elusive. God is not the fixer of our troubles – that's our job – and the risen Jesus Christ is our savior, not our mascot. The triune God calls to us – in creation, in our hearts, and in the cries for help from those around us – and asks us to step across a threshold into a new reality – not the world as it is, but the world as it might be. We only catch glimpses of that reality – that's what makes it elusive – but we know, without the shadow of a doubt, that it's real. Call it heaven if you like, or the realm of God, if you prefer that term, or the risen Jesus Christ, or simply salvation. It's not the label that matters, but the reality. Accept it, embrace it, rejoice in it, share it, and above all, make it yours. Your life will never be the same if you do.