

We continue this week in our celebration of Easter, of resurrection.

Today our text invites us to consider the mystery of the resurrection and the disciples’ various responses to the risen Christ.

As I study the Gospel accounts of the resurrection and Jesus’ appearance afterward, I find myself noticing more than ever how strange it is that nobody ever recognizes Jesus at first.

Mary thinks Jesus is the gardener, then he says her name and she realizes it is her “teacher.” Even to those who knew him well, Jesus doesn’t look like he did before.

The disciples eventually come to believe it is Jesus, after they have seen his wounds.

Thomas wants to see this for himself, and somehow gets branded as “The Doubter.” Jesus was confirmed as dead, so personally, I think asking for a little glimpse of the guy in person wasn’t asking so much.

Thomas then sees and believes that the person before him is his Lord, Jesus.

Today, in Luke’s gospel, we find Jesus walking along the Emmaus road with two disciples, but (again) “their eyes were kept from recognizing him.”

Then when he is at their home and blesses the bread, breaks it and gives it to them, “their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.”

And then... “he vanished from their sight.”

The resurrected Jesus is very, very mysterious. He can eat fish, so he isn’t a ghost. But He is always popping in and out of locked rooms, making cameo appearances at tombs, being raised up into the air. His identity is not readily known.

We find again and again that just “seeing” Jesus with physical eyes isn’t enough.

For these early followers of Jesus, faith happens when some kind of interior vision is opened, when the person in question recognizes Jesus for who he is.

This reminds me of this television show I used to LOVE called Joan of Arcadia. (anyone ever watch it?)

God keeps showing up to this girl, Joan, but always in a different form. Sometimes God appears as a pale, punked out kid with a Mohawk and multiple piercings, sometimes as the middle-aged African American lunchroom lady, sometimes as the gardener, sometimes as a child.

Joan never knows who it really is until God does something Goddish, like mentioning a secret that only she would know.

Kind of like how, in the Gospels, nobody knows it is the resurrected Jesus until he does something Jesus-y.

My favorite thing about Joan of Arcadia was that it always reminded me to watch for God to show up in surprising places and people.

We do believe that all people are made in God’s image, right?
And don’t we also believe that each person we meet might be “Christ” for us?
When we are kind, give water or food or clothing or shelter, we do it to Christ.
When we are indifferent, unkind, even cruel, we do it to Christ.

The Living Christ might show up anywhere, anytime.
Living like that can make life kind of exciting.

However...it seems like we have lost some of that mystery and excitement when we think about the resurrection.

Most of us have internalized this sacred story about Jesus dying and being raised and going up to heaven and now all our sins are forgiven. Death is defeated.
And I like that story a lot. There is great power and hope there.

But I suspect that there is something MORE to the resurrection life than acknowledging it as a business transaction that happened between us and Jesus and God 2000 years ago.

I think there is much much more....but we have stopped looking for Jesus.

Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus,
we believe we know the reality of things.
We are walking along, with our heads bowed low, trudging along toward the day’s destination.
And we don’t even notice that Jesus is walking beside us, talking to us, teaching us to see the world in a new way.

We might even, like those disciples, note our hearts “burning within us.”
But heartburn is uncomfortable.
And the modern remedy for that is a couple of Tums or Roloids, right?
So we pop a pill and totally miss Jesus.

How do we get to a place where we really SEE Christ alive among and within us?

Can we hear Jesus speak our name (like Mary did), see his wounds (like Thomas), know him in the breaking of bread (like the disciples on the Emmaus road)?

I think we can.

But I know that, for me, sometimes it is very hard.
Because quite often Jesus doesn’t look the way I expect.
Sometimes he is hidden and I have to really look to find him.

I heard a wonderful poem recently about seeing things that are hidden.

It was written by Naomi Shahib Nye in response to a query from an earnest man who wanted to know about poetry.

I think it has much to teach us about the spiritual life and about recognizing Jesus.

Valentine for Ernest Mann

You can't order a poem like you order a taco.
Walk up to the counter and say, "I'll take two"
and expect it to be handed back to you
on a shiny plate.

Still, I like your spirit.

Anyone who says, "Here's my address,
write me a poem," deserves something in reply.

So I'll tell a secret instead:

poems hide. In the bottoms of our shoes,
they are sleeping. They are the shadows
drifting across our ceilings the moment
before we wake up. What we have to do
is live in a way that lets us find them.

This is the part of the poem that I heard at first. And I just got caught up in that last line: “What we have to do is live in a way that lets us find them.”

Then I learned (thank you google) that there is a second half to the poem.

And if this second half doesn't apply to life together (especially in the church) I don't know what does.

Listen to this:

Once I knew a man who gave his wife
two skunks for a valentine.

He couldn't understand why she was crying.

"I thought they had such beautiful eyes."

And he was serious. He was a serious man
who lived in a serious way. Nothing was ugly
just because the world said so. He really
liked those skunks. So, he re-invented them
as valentines and they became beautiful.

At least, to him. And the poems that had been hiding
in the eyes of skunks for centuries
crawled out and curled up at his feet.

Maybe if we re-invent whatever our lives give us
we find poems. Check your garage, the odd sock
in your drawer, the person you almost like, but not quite.

And let me know.

Skunks with beautiful eyes! Don't you just LOVE it?

I ask again, how do we live so that we find the poems? So that we find Christ?
How do we make our way past the stench of skunks
(and friends, we can be a skunky people!)
to find the poetry of their eyes?

If we can learn to live with this level of awareness, what might our lives look like? What might the life of this community of people look like?

Recently, on one of our sunny days, I was sitting in my back yard, working on this very sermon, and looking up at these big puffy white clouds that there occasionally covering up the sun.

Suddenly I noticed that in the wispy fringes of the clouds, where the sunlight was just able to shine through, there were rainbows!

The whole cloud was fringed in rainbows!

I thought about calling for my son William to come and see this wonder, when I thought...hmmm...why have I never seen these rainbows before?

On a hunch, I slid down my sunglasses and ...POW...the rainbows disappeared into a glare of white light.

Sunglasses on; I can see the rainbows.

Sunglasses off; painful glare around white cloud.

Is this the gift that was given to those early followers? (and perhaps is still given to us?).

To see with holy sunglasses what has been thus far invisible to our naked eyes?

To see what has always been there in a new way?

Do me a favor, will you? This spring and summer, each time you put on your sunglasses, pretend for just a moment that they are your special “Jesus Spotter” Sunglasses. If you practice (and ask God to help you) I bet you will see something you would have otherwise missed.

Someone once said, “If you can't see Jesus in the next person you meet, you might as well stop looking.”

I wouldn't go that far....I would keep looking. But he makes an interesting point.

In your imagination, at least, try putting on your JesusSpotter Sunglasses at home when your spouse or kids are driving you nuts.

Try it at work before a meeting with that difficult boss or co-worker.

And especially, try it here, at church, with this community of faith.

Look for Jesus in each other.

Forgive quickly, give generously, love extravagantly.

What might it be like, if each person here lived like that?

Who knows who we would become? What God might do in and through us?

Try it. Let me know how it goes.

What I know to be true is that Jesus Christ is alive and we can see him:

--In the faces of the poor, the hungry, the homeless.

--In the strange faces of the ones who have been called “enemies.”

--In the irritating neighbor and the angry, horn-honking driver.

--In the toddler having a full-blown tantrum.

--In the mirror, first thing in the morning, before we have remembered to put on our masks.

--In the trees, in the sky, in the mud, in the mountains, in the newspaper....

Who knows where, like Nye’s elusive poems, Christ might be hiding, waiting to be revealed if we are willing to look with new eyes?

Amen.