

SERMON- Easter 3A

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Peter 1:17-23

Psalms 116:1-3, 10-17

Good Shepherd (Virtual)

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Luke 24:13-35

OPENING:

Here's a brief bit of dialogue from Oscar Wilde's play *Salomé*; it's a conversation between King Herod and two villagers from Nazareth.

HEROD (asks them): *He (Jesus) raises the dead?*

1st NAZARENE (answers): *Yea, sire, He raiseth the dead.*

HEROD (replies): *I do not wish him to do that. I forbid (Jesus) to do that. I allow no man to raise the dead. This Man must be found and told that I forbid Him to raise the dead. Where is this Man at present?*

2nd NAZARENE (pauses and....answers):

He is in every place, my lord, but it is hard to find Him.¹

(I speak to you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN.)

Where is Jesus? How do we find him? How does one recognize him? Would we even know him if Jesus were to appear today?

Those are questions both from today's modern mind, and also from Jesus' time.

Jesus' disciples, on the Emmaus Road and elsewhere, don't seem to have that much skill in recognizing the Risen Lord. Jesus is playing a game of hide & seek with the disciples, and he consistently wins.

Why does he do so? What purpose does that serve?

In our current situation, with everything flipped upside down, it might help us to realize that we don't always find Jesus in familiar places. We usually expect to find Jesus at church, present in Word and Sacrament. But Church buildings are closed. In fact, everything is closed. So, we must look for Jesus elsewhere, in our homes, among our family members, and in God's creation.

He is in every place, my lord, but it is hard to find Him.

¹ Quoted in Wright, N. T. 2003. *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 684.

EXAMPLE

This all reminds me of that episode from the sitcom *M*A*S*H*—the one where a wounded soldier is brought into the hospital, and he claims to be none other than.... “Jesus Christ.” The actor who plays the soldier has this remarkable calm and peace about him. With loving eyes and a bandage around his head, it’s a convincing portrayal.

As the episode progresses, some respond to this “appearance” of Jesus with fear and accusation. They want to court martial him or send him back to the frontlines. The more sympathetic assume that the soldier has experienced some sort of brain damage. So, the Jesuit priest tries to theologize with him, the psychiatrist (who happens to be Jewish) tries to psychoanalyze him. Finally, the doctors ask about his identity.

The soldier responds by saying: *What can I do to convince you?*

The doctors say: *A miracle would definitely be a step in the right direction.*

*Maybe a few steps. Say, upon the water.*²

PRESENCE and ABSENCE

Our human first reaction is always that: prove it to me with something big.

“Let me put you to the test”—which, also, need I remind you, the Devil’s game plan.

But Jesus ignores it all, in the Resurrection appearances, and I think in our lives, he continues this game of Hide & Seek. Here he is, and there he goes.

In the words of Frederick Buechner: “Jesus came back from death not in a blaze of glory, but more like a candle flame in the dark, flickering first in this place, then in that place, then in no place at all.”³

We would prefer it some other way. But Jesus does not reveal himself in the town square with lights flashing. Rarely, at least in my experience, does Jesus overwhelm us with that sort of presence.

² *M*A*S*H* (1972–1983): Season 4, Episode 9 - *Quo Vadis, Captain Chandler?* (Original Air Date: November 7, 1975.) Dialogue taken from Transcript: https://sublikescript.com/series/MASH-68098/season-4/episode-9-Quo_Vadis_Captain_Chandler; Full Episode can be seen at: <https://www.facebook.com/21CFMASHTV/videos/1020356978118163/?v=1020356978118163>

³ Buechner, Frederick. 2006. *Secrets in the Dark: a Life in Sermons*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 252.

In our story, the two disciples unknowingly invite the stranger in their midst into their home. They invite this guest to eat with them, the Guest then becomes the Host. (Notice how Jesus keeps switching places!) When they finally realize it, Jesus disappears.

That the disciples did not see him shows that even those who should have, could not. That gives us hope. Because the disciples don't *earn* this relationship with Jesus, we can also not rationalize or intellectualize ourselves towards it.

Faith instead is a gift, freely given and freely received.⁴ Our relationship with Jesus cannot be forced or coerced.⁵ It's not the special knowledge of a privileged few, or reserved for a certain group. Faith then is not even the property of the Church, and especially not its buildings.

EXAMPLE #2

Another story: in the long process to becoming a priest, I had made it all the way to the Final Interviews with the Diocese, I headed down to Fredericksburg in a coat and tie, nervous and excited. Midway through the interview, they asked: "What would you do if you were driving down an old country road, by yourself, and all of the sudden, Jesus was sitting in the passenger seat next to you, what would you do?"

That's a strange question and I think they ask it because they are worried that Seminary has made you too academic and intellectual, that you won't be able to talk about your encounters with Jesus in a way understandable to your congregation.

At another time, I will tell you the miserable answer that I came up with at the time. But here is how I might respond now, in light of our current circumstances.

The types of encounters that I have had with the Risen Lord are as unpredictable and mundane as the scenario posed in that question, you just don't know when Christ will show up in your midst, through locked doors, on a dusty road, next to you in the passenger seat, in a hospital, in a global pandemic.

⁴ Betz, H. D. 1969. "The Origin and Nature of Christian Faith According to the Emmaus Legend: (Luke 24:13-32)". *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*. 23 (1): 37, 39, 40, 45.

⁵ Craddock, Fred. 2009. *Luke*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press., 285

There Jesus is, presence; and then he is not, absence.
He is in every place... but it is hard to find Him.

CONCLUSION:

In these times, we might have to get familiar with new ways to do so. We are hearing some of those ways, in our daily Moments of Grace, it's been a blessing to read about all the ways that those at Good Shepherd are encountering God in their everyday lives during this season of pandemic.

To paraphrase the famous quote from St. Theresa of Avila: "Now... yours are the feet with which Christ walks to do good. Yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world. Christ has no body on earth but yours. *Christ has no Youtube Presence, no Facebook Live, no Zoom presence but yours. No telephone, no wave across the street, no email but yours*"⁶

Christ's appearing in the breaking of the bread thus makes every meeting place Emmaus.⁷

Jesus is present wherever there are people looking for him, present to those who raise questions about him, present also when those question raise doubt and confusion and anger.⁸

Back to that episode of *M*A*S*H*, it ends without resolution. The soldier who thinks he is Jesus gets ready to leave for another hospital. He encounters the saintly Radar O'Reilly who asks the man to bless his teddy bear. The soldier does, and then for the first time in the show's history, Radar reveals his name "Walter" and the man claiming to be Jesus says "Bless you Walter."

Our identity is changed forever in our encounters with Christ, be it in the breaking of the bread or on the Emmaus Road, we are profoundly changed, as we run back to Jerusalem, our hearts burnings and our lives changed forever, eager to share the good news of Easter: that we have seen Christ risen in our very midst! **AMEN**

⁶ Quoted in Etling, Mark. (Jan 21, 2020) "Christ has no body on earth but yours." *National Catholic Reporter*
<https://www.ncronline.org/news/spirituality/soul-seeing/christ-has-no-body-earth-yours>

⁷ Craddock, 287.

⁸ Betz, 39-40