

Easter 3, April 23, 2023

Recognizing the one who returned

I was at Clergy Conference earlier this week, and I heard a great story from the keynote speaker Mark Bozzuti-Jones that I want to share with you.

A man lost his watch, and was looking all over the ground for it. A woman came up and asked him what he was doing. "I've lost my watch," he replied. "Let me help," she said. They looked for several minutes with no sign of the watch. Finally she turned to the man and said, "where did you lose your watch?"

"About 10 blocks from here", he said.

"Then why aren't we looking back there?" she asked.

"Oh," he said, 'because the light is better here.'

In today's Gospel the two men on the road to Emmaus think they've lost their Lord. Now when you find something that you've lost, I guarantee it will have been in the last place you looked. But for Jesus' followers the last place they would look for the risen Christ was right there among them. But that is just where he they discovered him.

If fact, this story isn't really about finding the one who was lost, but recognizing the one who returned. And for the early followers of Jesus, that meant recognizing him right in their midst.

I can understand that. One of the challenges I've had here at St Peter's is recognizing parishioners when they are not wearing masks. Because several of you wear masks all the time to keep safe from COVID, which is very wise. And there are few of you whom I have rarely seen without a mask.

Have any of you had that jolt when you finally saw someone's entire face after only knowing them with their mask on during pandemic? And you're like, who is that? Or, Oh, that's what that person looks like! Often, it's not what I expected. I had filled in the blanks on people's faces with my own imagination, which was not very accurate. I had to get to know some faces all over again.

I wonder if this is what it was like for those first followers of Jesus, who had known him very well before he died on the cross and then couldn't recognize him right away after he rose from the dead. I wonder if there was something like a mask that had been removed from Jesus that made it hard for them to recognize him. Maybe it was because they were seeing him as he really was, and not just how they imagined him to be while they traveled with him on the road.

Whatever happened, after Jesus rose from the dead and started visiting his old friends, they had a hard time recognizing him. In the gospel of Luke, the disciples get 40 days to learn how to recognize and follow the Risen Christ. Because it was different than following Jesus before he died and rose again.

When they first met Jesus and started to follow him, being a disciple meant traveling with Jesus from place to place, helping to gather the crowd, learning his stories and assisting him in healing people, making sure he ate and got rest. Sometimes they got to heal people or cast out demons all by themselves. Following Jesus was about learning how God heals and finds and makes room for everyone in the life of God – Jesus called that the Kingdom of God. Being part of Jesus’ ministry meant learning what the Kingdom of God was like.

After Jesus rose from the dead, the disciples had to learn how to live in the Kingdom of God, and help others get there themselves. They had to come to terms with the fact that Jesus wasn’t going to look like the guy who called them, told the stories, and healed the people. Because that guy was about to ascend into heaven to live with God in a way that made him easier to find but harder to recognize – if that makes sense.

Easier to find because as soon as Jesus went to be with his Abba, he would be as close to everyone as God ever is – no distance. Harder to recognize because his human face and body weren’t going to remain the way people knew him.

Today’s story is about people who began to recognize Jesus everywhere -- at the tomb, on the road to Emmaus, and in the upper room and in other places. And with each meeting, Jesus taught his followers how to recognize him in new ways. And they gave the secret to us.

So what were the ways that Jesus appeared to Cleopas and his unnamed friend as they made their seven-mile hike to Emmaus? What helped them finally recognize the Jesus who had been with them the whole time?

At the start of today’s story the two followers are deep in conversation with each other. They are deeply confused and shaken over what had happened to Jesus and to them that weekend. They were mystified over what they had seen and heard. So they were asking questions and trying to figure it out together. That’s when Jesus first came on the scene. Even though they didn’t know that’s who it was, Jesus was there, right in the middle of their questions with a few questions of his own. What were you talking about? He wanted to know.

That says to me that even if I’m confused about my faith, and about who God is and where God is, if I keep talking about it with others who have the same questions, if I don’t keep it to myself but share my questions with others – Jesus will be there in the conversation. And Jesus may be asking me some questions himself, if I listen for them.

Another place that they felt the presence of Jesus was in their bodies. Jesus wasn’t just an idea in their head. His words made their hearts burn within them. It made them feel different. You know that feeling you get when you are sharing something really important with someone? Or you are learning something true from a friend or someone you love -- and you feel this warmth and jumpy inside? The early followers of Jesus knew that when that happened, Jesus was present. Were not our hearts burning within us?

When Jesus joined their conversation, he began to remind them of all the places in their Holy Scriptures that talked about the Messiah and how that pointed to Jesus. The early followers discovered that when they prayed and studied the places in their own faith tradition that told them about God, they recognized Jesus in those Words. Now back then, the New Testament hadn't been written yet. So those early followers recognized Jesus in stories about Moses and David, and in the prophets like Elijah and Isaiah. They recognized him in the Word of God.

And then there was the big one. Three days before they headed for Emmaus they had been in the upper room with Jesus at the last supper. They saw him break the bread and bless it and say this is my body – eat it in my memory. They saw him pass the cup around and say this is my blood – the blood of the new covenant shed for you. Maybe they didn't quite understand it at the time, but when this intriguing stranger took the bread and blessed it and broke it and gave it to them, they couldn't deny that it was Jesus who was doing it.

They got a glimpse of that familiar face and then the human Jesus disappeared. They were left with the broken bread, and their hearts burning within them, and the Scriptures ringing in their ears. I wonder if Jesus really left them at all.

This is how those early followers learned to recognize Jesus after he was no longer with them as before – they recognized Jesus in their questions and their conversations with one another; in the Scriptures that they prayed and studied all their lives; in the burn of excitement in their hearts; and in the breaking of the bread and the prayers. I think it happened to them over and over again, as they stayed together as a community. And they understood it better and better with the help of the Holy Spirit that God gave them at Pentecost. So make sure to be back here in four weeks when we celebrate that day.

Is there anyone here who has encountered Jesus in one of these ways? I

know I have. People say I look happy when I'm celebrating the liturgy with you. That's because my heart is burning within me. I see Jesus in your own faces – in the smiles and the tears and the questions you ask, the prayers you pray. I hear him in the Word, especially when it's shared by some of our youngest people like Lana and Henry and Grayson. I see him in the broken bread and wine, and in your hands as you receive them.

Today's Gospel is about recognizing Jesus when he's right in front of you. And while the light might be very good in one place, and the intel on what Jesus should look like or where he should show up could be very convincing, we have some bone deep knowledge about how Jesus comes to us and how to listen to him.

I hope you experience Jesus in this way too. You are not too young or too old to meet or recognize the risen Christ again for the first time, to find him in your midst. As I said on Easter morning, if you're looking for Jesus he'll find you. It was good news then, and it is good news now.

Amen.

