

If you have ever had to pick up a stranger at an airport or train station, you know how frustrating a general description can be: “Medium height and build, wearing jeans and a jacket.” That rules some people out but not many. Something more definitive and specific would be helpful wouldn’t it? How about: “Medium height and build, wearing jeans, a jacket and a 10 gallon hat.” At Dulles that would be helpful, in Dallas, not so much.

As we follow Jesus Christ throughout our lives, we are still surprised sometimes that we don’t readily recognize Christ in our lives. It’s not as if, like at the airport, we are looking for a stranger. Yet there are times when we just don’t see God in our midst even though He is in our midst.

That’s what is happening in today’s Gospel story.

You remember the story from last week. It was the first Easter Sunday. Christ had been resurrected, but He had not yet appeared to all of His disciples. Two of them, who had been in Jerusalem with the others at some point that first Easter day, were headed out of Jerusalem toward a village called Emmaus, about a seven mile journey. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them, but they didn’t recognize him. He taught them many things beginning with Moses and the prophets and interpreted for them about the Messiah. No doubt they listened intently.

When they arrived at home, they invited Him in for the night. It wasn’t until He was at the table with them where He took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. *Then their eyes were opened and they recognized Him, and He vanished from their sight. They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while He talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”*

They returned at once to Jerusalem. There they met the other disciples who told them, “It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.” Then the two told what had happened to them, and how they recognized Jesus when he broke the bread. No one expected to see Jesus because He was dead so when they did see Jesus, they didn’t recognize that it was Jesus.

But that happens, doesn’t it? Just when we think the world has caved in on us, like we may feel it has in this odd time of pandemic, and there is no point to it all, we encounter Christ! I would say to you and to myself, expect the unexpected from Christ. Live expectantly but not with stipulations about what to expect. If the devil is in the details, God is in the unexpected!

Pastor Glen Barnes of the First Baptist Church of Lodi, California tells about an incredible experience he had some time back. Barnes’ church was hosting a couple of visitors, two women, from Lesotho, Southern Africa. According to Barnes these two women have an incredible ministry caring for the poor and sick in South Africa, especially those suffering from AIDS. Unfortunately this ministry was taking a toll on them physically, emotionally and spiritually. In fact, one of the women shared with Barnes in confidence that she was really struggling, feeling burned out and wondering if it was time to move on to another ministry. As they talked about trying to hear God speak, she said that sometimes she just wished God would write it in the sky. Then she would know whether she was doing God’s will or not.

Later that very same day Barnes and these two ladies went on a little sightseeing tour of San Francisco. They went out on a boat onto San Francisco bay. They went by Alcatraz and under the Golden Gate Bridge. “It was gorgeous,” Barnes reports.

About half way out on their journey, they heard a rumbling like thunder in the sky and they looked up and right above them flew the Navy's Blue Angels. The two African women looked terrified and one asked Barnes if America was under attack. He reassured them that it was just a show.

As a part of the magnificent aerial demonstration, one of the planes took off over the city, turned its smoke stream on and went straight up. As it did it began skywriting. What it wrote was not a word or a sentence, but a symbol. The jet left floating there, written in the sky, a big AIDS ribbon. Pastor Barnes looked over at his new friend who was struggling with her work back home attending to AIDS sufferers. He had chills up and down his spine when he saw the ribbon in the clouds. She literally had tears running down her face as it seemed God, on this occasion, had literally written His answer to her in the sky, just as she had asked.

Perhaps you have had a similar experience--less dramatic, perhaps, but an experience in which God spoke to you. God does sometimes speak in very unexpected ways. You were at the end of your rope, hanging on for dear life. And then, a friend or maybe even a stranger said something and you realized this was a message from God. Or you heard a song, or read a story, or heard a sermon, and it was as if Christ was speaking directly to you. This happens most often to those who are believers. Notice that after Christ's resurrection, He showed Himself only to those who believed in Him. That's true in our lives. If you have surrounded yourself with a veil of skepticism, and I don't mean honest doubt like Thomas but suspicion, distrust or outright unbelief, you might not hear God speak. But if, in your time of trial, you ask God to show Himself to you, and be open in your seeking, you may be surprised how often that prayer will be answered.

God is not dead. God is not buried in the ground. God is alive and God is with us. That's what the disciples discovered on the road to Emmaus. They were discouraged, downhearted, defeated. And just when they were ready to give up, they encountered the Master. Like the lyrics to the song God's not Dead by the Newsboys, My God's not dead, He's surely alive He's living on the inside, roaring like a lion, God's not dead, He's surely alive He's living on the inside, roaring like a lion...

Oh, the eternal question, can I not find God on a golf course? Of course, you can. But when we are together, in the presence of other believers, when the scriptures are opened and the bread is broken--this is where you are most likely to encounter Christ. And this is one thing that is making this time apart, of social distancing, so difficult for us all. It's that we are not together and are not celebrating and receiving Holy Communion. A priest friend I met with on Zoom this week said, in this time when we are not taking Communion and are all feeling so bad about it, shows us just how Roman Catholic low church Virginia has become.

I just read a blog this week that a priest friend posted on Facebook speaking about the Christian faith being held in community and not individually. In it was this quote, which I read after I had written the words I just said. Listen:

"... in this room are the echoes of eternity. When the scriptures are read, when the bread is broken, when we bow in supplication before the throne of God, God is here. Let us open ourselves to God and hear God speak to our hearts"

How do you recognize Christ? Sometimes in the common things of life and sometimes in the uncommon; sometimes in community together and sometimes when alone; and sometimes in the expected and sometimes in the unexpected. Learn and practice to expect the unexpected. Amen