

Today is the third Sunday of the Easter Season, and our theme is “Christ Among Us”. As I reflected on this text in the gospel of Luke, I was reminded about the fact that the resurrection appearances of Jesus are all different. In today’s Lukan text Jesus seems to appear out of no where. He asks the disciples if they have something to eat. The disciples seem to experience Jesus as ghostly but also one who is physically hungry and needs to eat.

A few verses earlier in this very same chapter, Jesus is the stranger on the Emmaus road. He talks unrecognized with two of the disciples and walks with them a significant distance and then only later when they ask him to stay over with them and Jesus breaks bread, do they recognize him.

In Mark’s resurrection stories, Jesus appears very briefly to Mary Magdalene and then to two of “them” (likely the disciples) and later again at a meal and finally at his ascension, but all these accounts are in the longer ending of Mark which most scholars believe were added much later than the original body of Mark’s gospel. And again each appearance is different.

Matthew tells of Jesus briefly appearing to the women after they discovered the empty tomb and then he’s on a mountain in Galilee where eleven of the disciples see him “but some doubted.”

Finally, in John’s gospel Jesus appears to Mary weeping outside the tomb, he appears inside a locked down room, (in other words, Jesus doesn’t open the door, he just appears), a week later he again suddenly appears, and then on a beach where it took a while for the disciples to know who he was.

The good news of the resurrection is that it is not the same for those who were closest to Jesus; therefore, resurrection doesn’t have to be experienced exactly the same for us 2000 years later. Like those first disciples, we can experience the resurrection uniquely, and we can come to know Christ among us in our own context.

I began thinking about the ways in which we experience Christ among us today. For me, baptizing a child, like we baptized Monika Paige this morning makes real the Christ among us. Babies are channels of possibilities; we know that great potential is within their tiny bodies, and we watch with wonder as the miracle of their lives unfold. Christ is a channel of possibilities. Within our relationships with infant, child, youth, or adult friends, we know experientially the spark of divine life that God breathed into humankind; we experience the joys, sorrows, doubts, and realization of Christ among us.

Many of the biblical resurrection accounts happen at mealtime. Meals were very special back then; no fast food was available. And at these special “family times” the risen Christ appears to join his family. At the Jewish Seder meal there’s an empty chair for Elijah who was taken up to God and whose anticipated return ushers in a new age. At our Holy Communion table we welcome Christ Among Us to remind us who we are and whose we are. The words of Jim Manley’s song remind us “Christ is known to us in the breaking of the bread.”

There’s also a sense today as it was in those old, old stories that Christ is the one who shares the journey, who walks beside us, explaining, teaching, lifting us from fear and dread to hope and joy. So many times the gospel writers describe the disciples as idiots who just don’t get it. They don’t recognize Jesus even after he’s walked with them from one town to the next. Perhaps sometimes our eyes are glazed over as well and we are not attentive to the Christ among us.

In last Wednesday's Bible study Walter Bruggemann describes these disciples who "don't get it" as given a second chance at life. When Jesus died all their hopes and dreams died too; they were in despair; they didn't know what to do next; they were fugitives trying to hide from the soldiers who might recognize them as friends of Jesus. It was all over for them. But then they're given a chance at a second life because they experience Jesus again and their lives are given direction, purpose, and meaning. They were all but dead, but through Christ among them they are alive once more.

Who has given you a second chance at life? Perhaps it was someone who showered you with grace; one who knows you as you are and loves you with unconditional love and grace, and through them you have come to feel deep within your heart and burning within your bones, that you were created out of love and nothing can ever undo that. You know, life is hard sometimes, life happens whether we like it or not, and we need to hear a word or two of encouragement and affirmation.

A noted developmental psychologist said that it takes 10 positive affirmations to make up for every one negative that a child hears. We need to say to others over and over what we value in them. The adults I've known and counseled, who engage in self-destructive behavior are almost always those who have been beaten down over and over so many times that they can't turn off that awful tape running through their minds that whispers to them that they just aren't worthy. I'm here today on behalf of Christ among us to say "you are worthy."

Christ did not tell the disciples they were idiots for not recognizing him right off; rather he met them where they were--Mary weeping in the garden, the disciples hiding out in a locked room, on the beach where they'd gone back to their old profession of fishing. Christ meets us where we are; and sometimes he comes to us in relationships with the people with whom we share life. It is so good to live in community with one another because here Christ is among us!

I know people who say they have experienced Christ in their lives through the words and guidance of teachers, aunts, uncles, parents, coworkers, through amazing stories of faithful people fighting the good fight, through inspiring people who share the load of a weaker brother or sister, through loving people caring for the "fragile in the neighborhood" (again to use Bruggemann's words). Some of us are blessed to experience Christ among us through our children or through our life's partners.

Where ever there is good done, justice spoken, care shared, and a second chance at life, there is the risen Christ. We who love God are called to be channels of blessing. That IS what Christ expects us to do.

He says "go into all the world and preach the good news;" you may think you're dead to the world; you may think that all is lost; you may never think you'll get another job or outlive this recession or find a new love or muster the strength to make it till tomorrow, but Christ says "your life's not over, you may feel almost dead, but you have a second chance".

God does not intend for joy to go unspoken, God does not intend for love to remain entombed. God's will is made known in Easter's good news of joy proclaimed, of love arisen and set free, of Christ among us. Glory be to God. Amen