

Discovering the Holy In The Everyday

a sermon delivered by Rev. Scott Dalgarno on April 21, 2019

based on Luke 24: 13-35

In an effort to get down to the rubber meets the road level behind this morning's beautiful Easter story, let me open with a reminiscence.

As an old man, Jean Cocteau, the French writer and filmmaker, went back to a town where he spent a part of his youth. He found himself walking down a street that looked familiar to him. Then he did a curious thing. He trailed his hand along a wall that kind of called out to him from his past.

Then, more curiously still, he bent down, closed his eyes, and let his hand trace the wall at the height at which he remembered having traced it in his school days. Immediately something electric happened. Here are his own words:

"Just as the needle picks up the melody from the record, I obtained the melody of the past with my hand. I found everything: My cape, the leather of my satchel, the names of my friends, and of my teachers, certain expressions I had used, the sound of my grandfather's voice, the smell of his beard, the smell of my sister's dresses and of my mother's gown."

On the last night he had a mouth to eat with, Jesus sat down with his disciples to enjoy a meal. He took bread in his hands and broke it and said something they found puzzling. He said, "Do this in remembrance of me." He was talking about meals they would eat later without him, and the fact that the simple act of breaking bread and giving it to one another has in it the possibility of bringing him back.

Like running your hand along a fence you ran your hand along fifty years before can bring back the smell of your grandfather's beard.

Now take a moment Think back to the place you lived in your childhood. Was there something akin to that fence for you, that if you just touched it, it might bring back a sea of memory? I imagine there is.

Sacred moments, the moments of miracle, are often everyday moments, the moments which, if we do not look with more than our eyes or listen with more than our ears, reveal only . . . a garden, a stranger coming down the road behind us, a meal like any other meal. But if we look with our hearts, if we listen with our being and imagination . . . what we may see is Jesus himself. (The Magnificent Defeat, pp. 87-88)

Frederick Buechner wrote those words, and I have found them to be true. Ordinary moments are sometimes sacred moments. And yes, sometimes we have to look with more than our eyes to know that. Sometimes there is more to knowing than understanding with our intellect.

Think of the smell of the ocean, the sound of the first bars of Paul McCartney's song, "Yesterday," the touch of a someone's hand, a recording of your grandmother's laughter, the taste of a holiday side-dish.

They can be the means of grace, a sacrament, a promise that something holy is present, that what is holy is shot through our everyday.

Now to this morning's story. Jesus had died. There was no doubt about that. And with him had died the hope and faith of those who loved him.

The finality of his crucifixion had brought a devastating end to their growing sense that what he said was true; that in his presence they were somehow in the presence of something that smelled like God. All of that ended when they laid him in a borrowed tomb.

A few of the women had returned from the place he had been buried, claiming that the tomb was empty, and a few of the twelve had claimed to see him. But for the most part, his friends were still experiencing the shock of what had happened and the grief that their friend was gone. And so two of them, late in the day of Easter Sunday, went for a walk.

What is remarkable about this story is how ordinary it is. The two people could be any two of us. The road to Emmaus could be . . . any road.

Anyway, they walk along, talking about what had happened -- the traumatic events of Jesus's betrayal and arrest, his crucifixion, his death hanging between two thieves near a city dump. Soon they are joined by a stranger. Oddly, they do not recognize him.

They talk to him, explaining the events of Thursday and Friday, and then ask, so ironically, "Are you the only one in Jerusalem who doesn't know about these things?"

Then, as the sun begins to set, they extend hospitality to this stranger. They invite him to share an evening meal. He says, "Sure," and when he breaks bread for them; when they look at his hands, they recognized him. It's Jesus.

I love this little story. I love it because I think that's the way a lot of us relate to Christian faith in general and Easter in particular. We know the events of Christianity but we know little of the power and reality of them.

Craig Barnes, president of Princeton Theological Seminary, has said, *The question that Easter asks of us is not, "Do you believe," but, "Have you encountered a risen Christ?" . . . No one is ever ready to encounter Easter until he or she has spent time in the dark place where hope cannot be seen.* ("Savior at Large," *Christian Century*, 13 March, 2002).

With such a dark place in mind, listen to this first person account from Melissa Madenski of Portland.

After my husband died suddenly, I lost the ability to see color. The world appeared as a faded black-and-white photograph. I wanted desperately not to pay attention to anything. I heard the clichés we've learned in our culture to assuage our own discomfort with death: "You're lucky he didn't suffer." "At least you have the children." My friends were different, however, saying words that reached inside me and steadied my breathing.

"I can't see colors," I said to a friend one evening, and he said, "The colors will return." He was right. The loss of color was brief, as if a passing dizziness after a fall. What remains is a brilliance that illuminates what I love; the waves that crash near my home, my children, my friends, the dead that visit me every morning. The surprise is not love outlasting death, but this steady light that has stayed through suffering, through loss, through things not being the way I'd hoped for.

Did you hear that little snippet in the middle there? "The dead that visit me every morning."

I love that in this story of Jesus's appearance, his risen presence comes to two people we know nothing about. A number of scholars agree that Cleopas and the unnamed one are most likely husband and wife. That's, sadly, what is meant in the ancient world when two people are mentioned in a text and only one, a man, is named.

They are in the midst of the most ordinary human activity; they're taking an evening walk. But they are also dealing with a loss; and like so many losses, it's hard to understand. They aren't looking for Jesus. They don't even recognize him.

Faith, this story suggests, does not come as a result of an intellectual search or a struggle with ideas. Faith is not a product of studying theology, memorizing scripture, reciting creeds. Faith is not even produced by church-going.

No, faith is a gift. It comes up behind you when you are doing the most common thing imaginable. An ordinary moment becomes a holy moment, and a truth deeper and more profound than what our minds can understand becomes clear in a visitation and then it's gone.

My favorite part of the story is when the two, sitting there in the motel cafe, all alone now, make a mutual observation. They say, "'Weren't our hearts burning within us as he spoke to us?' Even before our blindness left us and we saw who he really was, something deep within us was catching on?"

That seals it for them. That changes them. They will never be the same people again. In the wake of that dinner, everything that before was complex and puzzling for them, became totally simple. It was suddenly a matter only of their hearts and nothing else.

Barbara Brown Taylor says the resurrection of Jesus permanently rearranges our understanding of reality. Just ask any of the millions of non-religious people who were moved to tears watching the Cathedral of Notre Dame burn. This stuff is deep in us, no doubt about it.

Before such a personal experience of the holy, we try to squeeze what we are told happened on Easter morning into our understanding of the world and how things work in space and time.

Afterward, it's the other way around. How we understand the world has to fit into the reality of a love we learn is more powerful than the death of our bodies, or the bodies of those we love.

We learn in our hearts, not our heads that, "There is no wreckage so total, no cause so lost, that the living Christ cannot redeem it." (BBT).

Maybe now, more than ever, we need to hear that message and take it to heart.

Did you see the piece in Thursday's *Oregonian* about new scientific research into near-death experiences? It seems that brain cells take hours to die after our hearts stop, a fact that enabled the research. One thing common to most, if not all those who have such experiences, is a sense of an accompanying presence – these people don't feel alone.

Most impressively, the study concluded that near-death events are entirely distinct from coma, dreams, ICU delusions or chemical delirium. The experience is 100% unique.

Many reported feeling a renewed purpose when revived, though not everyone wanted to come back. Many felt the event was more real than anything they had ever experienced. "I felt more joy and contentment than even the brightest moments in this life ever provided," said one. "I didn't want to return."

Back to the story. These two people, this man and this woman, felt bereft. And because they had no idea what to do with that deep feeling of loss and confusion, they did exactly what you or I would do. Before the sun went down on that lovely spring evening, they went for a walk. And while walking, they talked it out.

They didn't know what to make of the tragedy, this huge loss, but they didn't pretend it didn't happen, either.

And when they meet this man who is able to talk directly to their hearts, they invite him to enjoy dinner with them; so the moment will last a little longer; so the pain they feel might be assuaged in their being all together over something as everyday as an evening meal.

There is something so deeply meaningful about sharing a meal with others. Memories of mealtimes with those we love can last forever.

A man named Bart in the Texas Prison system testifies to this most profoundly in a way you or I cannot. He writes the following ...

THE SOUND OF THE CHOW CART rolling onto death row at 4 A.M. is the most effective alarm clock I have ever heard. It isn't humanly possible to sleep through the racket as the guard slams the cart into the metal doors to push them open. The cart this morning reeks of pancake syrup, once again shattering my hope that we might have that rarest of gastronomical delights: eggs. I sit up in bed and assess the six-by-nine-foot cage that has become my world. Each day I meticulously clean my cell in the manner of a man who has nothing left but a sliver of pride.

As I move to plug in my hot pot, I look at the six photographs of my family and my ex-fiancée that I have taped to the wall above my table, which is really just a piece of rusted metal attached to the wall. The chow cart arrives at my cell, and I accept my meal through the slot in the door, which is then slammed shut.

I pour my coffee and sit down at the table. Once again the cooks, through some form of penal culinary alchemy, have managed to make pancakes taste like cardboard. I barely touch them.

I don't wake up in the mornings to eat, you see. I get up to have my morning conversation around the table with my loved ones. We speak without words, sharing memories of a world forever vanished. I push my tray away, and tell my family I will see them later at dinner.

The longer we live, the more we realize that the beloved ones we have lost still people our world. Heck, they overrun it. We see them everywhere. It's only natural, and it's what we, all of us, need. We need contact with the ones we loved and who loved us.

Yes, and they can remind us of the love of the one who made us in the first place and is sometimes available to us in the subtlest of ways.

Let me close with a story told by Anne Lamott about a writer friend of hers who took her little one-year-old up to Lake Tahoe one summer weekend. They were staying in a rented condominium by the lake.

Now, because it was Lake Tahoe and many of the people who rent those condos gamble all night, all the bedrooms in this condo have blackout curtains so the renters can sleep all day long if they chose. That first afternoon, Anne's friend put the toddler down for a nap in his travel bed in one of these rooms in the pitch dark, and went to do some work on her laptop. A few minutes later she heard him knocking on the door from inside the room, and she got up, knowing he'd crawled out of his little bed. She went to put him down again, but when she got to the door, she found he'd locked it. He had somehow managed to push in the little button on the doorknob.

So he was calling to her, “Momma, Momma,” and she was saying to him, “Jiggle the doorknob, darling” and, as Anne Lamott said of this little fellow, “he didn’t speak much English yet – mostly he seemed to speak Urdu.

After a moment it became clear to him that his mother couldn’t open the door, and panic set in. He began sobbing. His mother ran around like crazy, trying everything possible, like trying to get the front door key to work, calling the rental agency where she left a message on the machine, calling the manager of the condo where she left another. Running back to check in on her son every minute or so. And there he was, still on the other side of the door, in the dark, this terrified little guy.

Finally she did the only thing she could, which was to slide her fingers underneath the door, where there was a three quarter-inch space. She told him over and over to find her fingers. Finally somehow he did. So they stayed like that for a really long time, on the floor, him holding onto her fingers in the dark. And eventually, he stopped crying.

Eventually he relaxed and she began to say, “Stand up. Open the door.” You can do it.” And every so often he’d jiggle the knob a little, and then he’d find her fingers again, and hold them a while for comfort. And eventually, after about a half-hour, it popped open.

Anne Lamott says, “I keep thinking of that story, how much it feels like I’m the two year old in the dark, and God is the mother and I don’t speak the language. ...I... just hold onto her fingers underneath the door. It isn’t enough, and yet it is.”

I wonder if that is not something like the experience of Cleopas and his wife, there on Easter evening. How there seemed to be such an insurmountable barrier between them and the One in whom they had let themselves hope in so much.

Like a door closed to them, until they realized that there were fingers in the gap reaching out for them, present to them more than they had thought possible. It wasn’t enough, and yet it was.

Again, the question that Easter asks of us is not . . . "Do you believe," but, "Have you encountered a risen Christ?" . . . No one is ever ready to encounter Easter until he or she has spent time in the dark place where hope cannot be seen."

And in case you miss it, this little round chapel is Emmaus, where we are sitting together today.

And for those of us who have fingers that can feel under the door, let me say that, for all of us, Jesus is here.

Amen