

John 20:1-18
Easter Sunday

John 20:19-31

April 5, 2015

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

JESUS KEEPS SHOWING UP

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

It was late on a hot August afternoon in North Myrtle Beach. The pastor was walking across the church lawn toward his office and looking at the long line of traffic on Highway 17. It had been a long day and he was looking forward to getting home for the evening.

Then he noticed the young man coming toward him from the highway. He was wearing tan slacks, a bright green golf shirt, and tennis shoes. He was carrying a small canvas bag. "Great," thought the preacher, "this is just what I need after the day I've had. Somebody looking for money, for a meal, for a motel room for the night."

The pastor decided to meet the young man on the front steps of the church. He was prepared to control the situation, but the young man spoke first. "Hello, you're the pastor, right? That's your name on the sign out front?" The pastor was a little bit irritated by the young man's cheerfulness and familiarity, and he immediately said, "Yes. What can I do for you?"

"What can you do?" the young man asked. "Nothing. That is, no more than you are already doing." For some reason, that just irritated the pastor even more. "Look, what do you want? I'm rather busy right now." The young man replied, "I don't need anything. I just wanted to drop by and say hello, to tell you how much I appreciate what you do."

The pastor was trying his best to evaluate the situation and to figure out if the young man posed any kind of threat. "Well," he said, "that's good of you. But who are you? I didn't get your name."

"Jesus Christ."

For some reason, the pastor wasn't really surprised to hear the young man say that. He'd heard just about everything from people over the years. "Look, are you trying to be funny?" But the young man said, "No. Does that strike you as funny? I know you've had a long day. All I wanted to do was to stop by and tell you, face to face, how much I appreciate what you're doing here. I know it's not easy." Then the young man continued, "This isn't the easiest place to serve. But the church looks good and you have done a good job."

The pastor just stood there with his mouth open and nodded.

Then the young man asked, "Do you read the Bible? Are there any questions you have about it? Anything you don't understand?" The pastor couldn't believe it when he

heard himself saying, “Yes, I read the Bible, as often as I can. I suppose everybody has questions about it.”

“But do you **enjoy** the Bible?” The pastor said, “Yes, I like it, yes.”

“Thank you,” said the young man.

The pastor asked, “Look, if you’re Jesus, where are you going?”

The young man said, “Akron, Ohio.” When the pastor said, “You’ve got to be kidding. Why Akron, Ohio?” the young man replied, “Business, you know, usual stuff.” Then he put his hand on the pastor’s shoulder and said, “I know you’re busy and I don’t want to keep you. I just wanted to stop by and say thanks.”

The pastor just stared at the young man. “You don’t want anything? You don’t need something?” “No, no thanks,” said the young man, “keep up the good work. Don’t be discouraged.” Then the young man turned and walked back toward Highway 17. He turned once and waved at the pastor, who sort of half-waved in return.

“Guess who I just talked to,” the pastor said to his wife, as she stood there with a cup of coffee in her hands. He told her the whole story. “I hope you didn’t cooperate with him,” she said. “You didn’t encourage him, did you? You mean you just stood there talking with him?”

The pastor said, “What was I supposed to do? I’m seen stranger people in North Myrtle Beach. Jesus himself said stranger things.”

His wife went back into the kitchen. A few minutes later, she came back with a cup of coffee for her husband. “If he was Jesus, then why was he going to Akron, Ohio?”¹

Jesus keeps showing up!

That seems to be a pretty obvious Easter Sunday message. In more formal, theological, liturgical language, we proclaim, “Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!” But what that means is, if we **really** believe that Jesus Christ has been raised up from the dead, never to die again, then he will keep showing up, even or especially at the most unexpected times in our lives.

The disciples huddled in that locked room on the evening of the first Easter Sunday might have been as surprised and skeptical and incredulous as the pastor in North Myrtle Beach to meet Jesus. Peter and John had already visited the empty tomb. Mary Magdalene had already announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord!” and told them the things Jesus had said to her.

But, do you think they were prepared to meet Jesus there in that locked room? Sure, their reaction was different from the skeptical North Myrtle Beach pastor’s reaction. The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. What most of them had only heard about from Peter, John, and Mary they now experienced for themselves, first-hand — Jesus is alive and in their midst!

But for whatever reason, Thomas missed out on meeting Jesus that Easter evening. Imagine the other disciples saying to Thomas, “Guess who we just talked to.” When Thomas asks, “Who?” they tell him, “We have seen the Lord!” Now, the pastor’s wife said, “I hope you didn’t cooperate with him. You didn’t encourage him, did you?”

You mean you just stood there talking with him?” Obviously that’s not what Thomas said to his fellow disciples, but he did say, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” (John 20:25)

Poor Thomas — he doesn’t ask for anything the other disciples haven’t already received, to see Jesus face to face, to see his wounds and be convinced that Jesus is really alive. After all, Jesus himself showed the other ten disciples his hands and his side without them even asking. Besides that, Thomas makes **the** basic and ultimate confession of faith when he says, “My Lord and My God!”

And yet, 2000 years later, Thomas isn’t remembered as “Thomas the disciple” or “Thomas the believer” or “Thomas the confessor” or “Thomas the faithful” or even “Thomas the Twin.” No, 2000 years later, we still talk about “Doubting Thomas.” But when Thomas actually got what he thought he wanted — “Then [Jesus] said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side’ — Thomas suddenly realized he no longer needed that kind of “proof.” As someone has said, this story about Thomas moves him **and** us from belief in the resurrection to faith in the risen Lord.

Jesus keeps showing up!

The risen Lord showed up at the tomb and called Mary by name. (John 20:16)

The risen Lord stood in the midst of his disciples who were hiding out because they were afraid, and he said to them (three times), “Peace be with you.” (John 20:19-29)

The risen Lord walked along the road to Emmaus with two of his followers and led them in a Bible study they would never forget. (Luke 24:25-27)

The risen Lord took bread and broke it and gave it to them and their eyes were opened and they recognized him. (Luke 24:30-31)

Jesus keeps showing up!

On this Easter Sunday, if we believe that Jesus has been raised from the dead and is alive, never to die again, why would we think that Jesus wouldn’t keep showing up in our midst even today?

In a few minutes, we’ll come to the Lord’s table and eat the bread and drink from the cup. The sacrament has been called “the Word acted out.” The gospel proclaims the good news this Easter Sunday — “Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!” Now we are invited to meet the risen Lord at his table. Easter is not, first and foremost, about agreeing intellectually with the correct or provable explanation about how the tomb could have been empty 2000 years ago. Easter is not, primarily, about begrudgingly giving in to some shaky propositions about life after death. But, then again, Easter is not about checking our minds at the sanctuary door and blindly accepting some ancient doctrine about a man who was crucified and said to have been raised up from the dead.

Easter is about meeting the risen Lord Jesus Christ, who keeps showing up in our midst, even when we hide out behind locked doors and four walls. Easter is about the risen Jesus showing up and standing in our midst — still today, 2000 years later — and

giving us his peace and filling us with his Holy Spirit and sending us out from inside these four walls and from behind whatever doors we have locked because we are afraid. Easter is about meeting the risen, living Lord Jesus Christ — in the Word, in the water, in the bread, in the cup. Easter is about, even in the midst of the doubts that life forces upon us, finding ourselves saying with Thomas, “My Lord and my God!”

A friend and minister colleague recently told about two strangers showing up at the church unannounced and asking if they could pray in the sanctuary. The church secretary said, “Of course,” and took them to the sanctuary. The maintenance man was vacuuming in the sanctuary, but he stopped to give the two people the space and quiet time they needed. He did watch what they did, however. The two visitors sat in each pew in the sanctuary and prayed for the people who sit there on Sunday. They stood in the pulpit and prayed for the minister. They sat in the choir loft and prayed for the choir members. They sang some hymns. When they were finished, they found the church secretary and thanked her and asked if they could pray with her. “Of course,” she said. Then the two strangers went on their way.

Jesus keeps showing up! Jesus keeps showing us that although he was crucified, he is alive and with us still today. Jesus keeps saying, “Peace be with you.” Jesus keeps giving us the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus keeps sending us out from behind our locked doors and our fears. Jesus keeps calling us to trust in him.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

And he keeps showing up . . .

Thanks be to God!

Let us pray: O God, week after week, you gather your people. You proclaim your Word of life. You feed us with food that is eternal. You share your Holy Spirit. You renew us with blessings morning by morning. O God, transform us by Christ’s resurrection from the dead, that we may embrace all that you have made and live in love for you and for our neighbors; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

NOTES

¹William H. Willimon, “A Visitation: Epiphany Meditation.” Rev. David Bowman shared this article with me in Rocky Mount, NC in the early 1980’s. I am unable to locate the proper citation for the magazine or journal in which it originally appeared.