

COVENANT WORD

Amazing Presence

Acts 3:12-19; I John 3:1-7; Luke 24:36b-48

A message by
Rev. Sarah Jackson Shelton
Pastor
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Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting
to read and study these
thoughts more
carefully. Please know
that I do not take full
credit for anything that
may be contained within,
because I may have read
or heard something at
some point during my
pilgrimage and do not
remember its source and
thus, cannot give the
rightful author his/her
credit. I pray that you
will find inspiration and
encouragement.
Sarah Shelton



WHERE FAITH COMES TO LIFE

It is still the very first day of the week.

While the lectionary divides the resurrection stories into bite-size pieces over the several Sundays in the Easter season, it feels like there is a month long time span for Jesus to make all his recorded appearances. Luke's gospel, however, is clear: "It is [still] the first day of the week."

Luke has a lot of things happen on that one day. The women, early in the morning, return to the burial site to find it empty. The women listed are Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Joanna and "other women..." neither described nor numbered. At the tomb, they see two men in dazzling apparel who remind the women of Jesus' words that he would be resurrected. The women return to report to the disciples, and the disciples do not believe them, dismissing their words as being an "idle tale."

On that very same day, an unnamed disciple and Cleopas are leaving Jerusalem to return home to Emmaus. They are joined by a third man who doesn't seem to know anything about the events that occurred in Jerusalem during Passover. They fill him in, processing the information as they tell it. The telling feels like practice for when the disciples will, in the days ahead, stand in the Temple and recite these very details to the masses. It is what the reading from Acts relays. The disciples heal a lame man at the Temple and when everyone is filled with wonder and amazement by their action, Peter and John stand on Solomon's Porch of the Temple to tell the details of the events of the first day of the week. Their retelling is sufficient enough to annoy the Sadducees (who,

of course, thought they had "handled" the Jesus problem) but the people... the people by the thousands respond by believing the words regarding the resurrection of Jesus. But I am getting ahead of myself. The first day of the week has enough significance of its own.

As the two disciples near their home in Emmaus, they invite their traveling companion to stay with them. They sit at the table, and the guest does an unusual thing. The guest acts as host! The guest takes the bread. The guest blesses the bread. The guest breaks the bread, and the guest shares it with his friends. Does that sound familiar to you? It did to them too and so, suddenly their eyes are opened and they realize that their

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companion is Jesus. Jesus, present to walk along the way. Jesus, present in the listening and the talking. Jesus present in the grieving and the teaching beginning all the way back with the prophets. Jesus, present in the breaking of bread.

With their recognition, Jesus vanishes. Poof! Gone! And so these disciples get up, walk the seven miles back to Jerusalem and find the other disciples still behind locked doors. Remember, it is still that first day of the week in Luke's gospel.

As they tell the gathered disciples about the walk and about the breaking of the bread, Jesus is suddenly present in the room. I have to admit that my imagination gets in the way here. What is that like to have Jesus just suddenly appear? Is it like in the movie Superstar when Jesus suddenly appears in a teenage girl's room? He is backlit by a golden aura

while Norman Greenbaum's "Spirit in the Sky" plays in the background!

Surely, it wasn't as hokey as that, but scripture does say that those present are startled. They are afraid. They are convinced he is a spirit. Jesus, however, seems intent on making sure they know he is real. He invites them to not only look at his wounds, he invites them to handle them in order to know that he is flesh and bone. And then he eats broiled fish. This is a pretty ordinary picture of Jesus even though he has experienced the extraordinary. So maybe rather than focusing so much on the body of Jesus, maybe what we need to do is focus on his amazing presence. A presence that was in Emmaus as well as the room in which the disciples gather as well as at the Temple when the disciples preach. It is a presence that takes the initiative to come to wherever his disciples happen to be.

In the movie *Hook*, Peter Pan has grown into a tightly wound business man. He gets taken back to Neverland to save his own children from Captain Hook. The lost boys recognize him immediately, but Peter doesn't remember who he is nor the things he is capable of doing. The boys can't figure out why Peter can't fly, why he isn't playful, why he can't engage his imagination. After days of attempting to recover the Peter Pan they know, the exhausted lost boys sit down for dinner. All the bowls are seemingly empty until Peter figures out that the food appears only if you can imagine it first. He is so successful that a food fight occurs. They laugh and fling mashed potatoes. They call one another names and throw fruit, cutting it in mid-air with their swords. As Peter joins in the

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fun, one of the lost boys crawls in his lap and holds Peter's face in his hands. He looks Peter squarely in the eye and says with wonder and respect, "There you are, Peter!"

I think that when Jesus says to his disciples, "See my wounds, handle my body," what he is really asking

them to do is look him squarely in the eyes in order to recognize and affirm, "There you are, Jesus." I am easily convinced that the presence of Jesus is among

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us more often than any of us realize or recognize. The resurrection is proven when Jesus draws near to us and we recognize his presence and power among and within us. He

appears only to those who will recognize him, his disciples...his ordinary, often dim witted disciples. He appears to them just like he continues to appear to us, his disciples that are doing ordinary things until our eyes are opened and we recognize that the presence of Christ takes the initiative to be present with us and so we can give testimony like: "Oh, there you are, Jesus!"

I think that the first time I began to grasp this was when I was in grade school. For some reason I don't remember, I was pawned off to my Dad who needed to go to the hospital to visit a parishioner. Believing it was unprofessional for me to accompany him, I was to remain outside the hospital room door and be in full control of myself. The visit was not long, but as Dad came out the door, the husband of the infirmed walked out with him. I could hear their conversation and blanched when my dad asked if they were OK financially. "There is money if you need it," he said. I stood there quietly obedient until we got to the car. In the car, I asked, "Does Mother know you are just giving away our money?" That was when Dad explained how the church has funds to assist in times of emergency.

So when I came to Covenant, I was told about The Bill and Marie Rogers' Fund and immediately there was a connection in my brain about how these funds would work. What I hadn't anticipated was the hundreds of people, known and unknown, that receive help from this fund for housing and utilities and medical expenses. What I hadn't anticipated were the additional pounds and pounds of pantry staples that would be given to Greater Birmingham Ministries. What I had not anticipated was the provision for shelter to homeless families through Family Promise or the U+1 meals on Wednesday nights or the trips to the Pig on Saturdays. What I hadn't anticipated were the coats given out on Wednesday nights, or the simple items on the Take What You Need fence, or the back packs we assemble for hungry children in our city's schools that have nothing to eat over the

weekends. What I hadn't anticipated were the letters written to our representatives in Washington D.C. or the food insecure persons who pass me on the street, call me by name and inspire me to find ways to do more.

My very first funeral here was for a young adult who completed a violent suicide. His mother called to inform me. I left immediately but when I got to their home, already present were many adults from this congregation. Also present were three of the young man's friends who apparently formed a tight allegiance to one another when they were just preschoolers under the tutelage of Virginia Jackson and Margaret Ward. As videos of these young adults as children at birthday and swimming parties played on the television, I looked around the room at a community of disciples. It was not what I had anticipated, but even more, I had not anticipated that as I looked at each face, I could have cupped my hands around their cheeks, looked them squarely in the eye and said, "There you are, Jesus."

When Wayne Thomason was in Baptist Montclair's ICU for days and days, I found that if I wanted to visit with Jean alone I needed to make a stop at the hospital no later than 7:30 in the morning. This was true because you were all there. You came for Jean. You came for Janet and David. You came for Chris. You came for Wayne. You were all there...that waiting room was full of your presence, your food, and your prayers. At any moment of the day, I could have cupped my hands around faces, looked them squarely in the eye and said, "There you are, Jesus."

In the reading from Acts, Peter tells those listening that they must repent because they have a bigger job. That larger task is to be the "refreshing presence of the Lord."(vs. 9) It is what I am privileged to witness you do over and over again, like:

- The adult choir singing to Tommie Sue Sides when she was home on hospice care
- Jenny Smith writing Miss Polly Wells' weekly checks
- Deacon Ponder taking communion to Gloria and Walter Furman
- John Hollis meeting the police at Michael Lieb's

house, only to find that one of the policemen was a former student

Ron Garza bringing Chinese take-out to Dorothy Weeks at the nursing home, but I won't mention what he brought her to drink!

"There you are, Jesus!"

Mary Oswald making coffee for Jake Baker on the morning of Harry's death

Carol Dean explaining birthing kits under the eaves of an African church

Gail Hill bringing Joyce Mitchell into her home after surgery

Orbie's ramp and all the other things this led to

The unveiling of Lynda Grooms' soul when we step on Cuban soil

"There you are, Jesus!"

Moving Brian; moving Ralph and David

Nurse Suzann taking night duty with Judy Bridgers but having the grace to call those nights "slumber parties"

Deacon Thomason accompanying me to a cemetery somewhere in North Alabama where we broke so many laws in order to spread a portion of Bill Stonecypher's remains so he could really reside, for all eternity, beside his parents as was his request, but his siblings refusal

Jack Brymer challenging the teens from SouthTown

Don and Esther Gardner, and now Alisha and Abdul, as our missionaries to Africa

"There you are, Jesus!"

Foster parents who fill children with love and hope and promise and the belief that they are not discarded but precious.

Showing up for court dates; making an appearance at the ball field or the play or recital or concert or as the stand-in-grandparent for grandpal's day.

The Sunday School teachers and mission leaders and choir directors who never flag in zealous preparations whether they have 2 or 20 show up

Having the grace to give sacred space for

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conversations about partnerships and affiliations when there was no guarantee about how it all might turn out

I could go on and on – mainly I want you to be affirmed about your being ordinary disciples doing seemingly ordinary things until our eyes are opened and we cup faces in our hands, look directly into the eyes and say, "There you are, Jesus...right in our midst."

We possess a power – a resurrection power – from God that the world cannot shut down nor contain! It is a refreshment that allows human life to be full and free even in the most failed of places. No more fear, just hearts alive with leaping and praising and singing over the amazing presence of Jesus right in our midst.

Do you recognize him when you see him?

If you do, have no doubt, it is because of the work of God. It is the Lord Jesus Christ, present with us, drawing near to us, opening the meaning of Scripture and showing us that the final word is not death. It is life. The final word is not judgment; it is mercy. The final word is not loneliness, but the fellowship of his unconquerable love forever and ever. (Fleming Rutledge, "Recognizing Jesus," *The Undoing of Death*) So, Alleluia! Alleluia to a risen Lord who loves us so! Amen.