I often associate people in the context with which I know them. I know my neighbors in the context of neighborhood. I know community people in the context of community. I know you in the context of this church.

When I meet people outside of the normal context in which I know them, sometimes I become confused. I can’t always place people when I meet them out of context. Tell me this has happened to you!

I was in a store recently. A man approached me and greeted me by name. I didn’t have a clue where I knew him. I took a quick mental inventory. Did I know him from neighborhood, community or church? I hit the enter key in my mind, but nothing registered. He could tell I was struggling, but he made no effort to help me. I was stymied, so I came right out and told him so. “I know you but I can’t quite place where it is that I know you.”

He seemed surprised and somewhat annoyed. “Pete, I’m your neighbor.” Oh yeah, of course. Now I remember. Somehow I associated this guy with his house, yard and hyper dog. When I met him out of context, I couldn’t place him.

I’m not the only person with this problem. There is a story told about Ulysses S. Grant during the time he was our nation’s 18th president. President Grant was walking alone in a rainstorm on his way to a reception held in his honor. Another man was walking in his same direction, so he offered his umbrella. The man didn’t recognize Grant. He had heard him give a campaign speech but had never shared an umbrella with him. They soon discovered they were heading to the same reception. The man admitted he was going out of curiosity as much as anything. Then he said, “I’ve always thought that Grant was a much overrated man.” Grant had the perfect comeback: “That’s my view also,” he said. Wouldn’t you have loved to be a fly on the wall when this guy arrived at the reception to learn the identity of the person with whom he was sharing that umbrella?

The two disciples in our story don’t recognize Jesus. He’s the last person they expect to meet late that afternoon on that deserted highway.

Luke identifies one of them by name—Cleopas (24:18). The other remains anonymous.
Since Cleopas would be known to Luke’s readers, perhaps his name would trigger the other’s identity. Some speculate that Cleopas’ traveling companion could be his wife.

It’s late on a Sunday afternoon. The two are returning home to Emmaus from a Passover celebration in Jerusalem, a distance of seven miles. Emmaus must be a really small town, since no one today can identify it with certainty.

Luke records, in verse 17, “They were kept from recognizing Jesus.” What kept them from recognizing Jesus? Was Jesus wearing a disguise? Was his resurrected body unrecognizable to them? Did their own doubt and fears blind them to the obvious? Or did God keep them from recognizing Jesus?

These disciples are engrossed in conversation when Jesus pulls up next to them. He asks innocently about the nature of their discussion. They express surprise that he would even have to ask about it. “Are you the only one in Jerusalem who hasn’t heard what’s happened the last few days?”

Hello!

Jesus plays dumb, so they recount the developments of the past few days. They regarded Jesus as a powerful prophet, but in the end he was crucified by the chief priests and Roman rulers. They had their hearts set that he would be the one to deliver Israel from Roman rule. It’s now the third day since his death. The women who went to anoint Jesus’ body for burial found his tomb to be empty. The other disciples verified their story.

These disciples provide a cogent summary of Jesus’ life and death. It’s understandable they leave off the resurrection since they’re still processing it. Jesus supplies the ending to his own story. He reminds them from the Scripture that Christ would first have to suffer these things before entering into his glory.

When they reach their destination, they invite their mystery guest to dinner. It isn’t long before their guest becomes the host. Jesus “took bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to his disciples” (24:30). Hmm! There are two other occasions where these four identical verbs appear in Luke’s gospel. The first instance, in Luke 9, is the feeding of the 5000. Jesus “took bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to his disciples” (9:16). The second occasion is the Last Supper. Jesus “took bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to his disciples” (22:19). The similarity in the language can hardly be coincidental.

When Jesus breaks bread and talks this way, suddenly it registers. They’re talking to Jesus. But as soon as they discover his identity, he vanishes. Our two disciples are left to connect the dots. Who was that masked man? “Were not our hearts burning within us as we
traveled with him on the road,” they said to each other. It also clarifies the title to my sermon, “Holy Heartburn.” When Jesus opened the Scriptures, their hearts seemed to catch fire.

John Wesley formed a society called Methodists. They were called Methodists on account of being so methodical about living the Christian life. Wesley has an entry in his journal dated May 24, 1738 that correlates to our text. He attended a worship service at a church on Aldersgate Street in London. The leader that evening was reading from Martin Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans. Wesley identifies the time in his journal to be a quarter to nine. He recalls that the leader was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ. As he was speaking, Wesley wrote, “I felt my heart strangely warmed.”

Wesley describes his conversion as his heart warmed with the presence of Christ. His heart was set on fire for God. The little flame lit that night at that nondescript London church ignited a great passion for God.

Jim Elliot was martyred for his faith in 1956 while trying to introduce the gospel to the Aucas tribe in Ecuador. The prayer found in his journal captures something of the fire in his bones, “O Lord, set my heart on fire. Ignite my spirit with your holiness and passion. May my life be kindling to start fires in the hearts and lives of all I encounter.” Would that our hearts be set on fire for you Lord.

It was packed for Easter last Sunday. The sanctuary and the hall were filled to capacity. We hurriedly tore down walls and set up more chairs to accommodate the crowd. More than 3200 joined us for worship.

The Sunday after Easter is altogether different. Some of our guests will be back, but most of them will be in recess until Christmas. In church parlance, we call it the C & E (Christmas and Easter) crowd. Life at VPC goes on as it did before.

I said in my sermon last Sunday that we believe Jesus is really and truly alive. He has risen from the dead and he is Lord. Jesus is on the move and there’s no telling where he might show up next. I said that he might even show up in your life if you are open to the possibility.

Jesus repeatedly shows up in unexpected places in the gospels. You find him dining with reviled tax collectors and prostitutes. You find him talking in public with a woman with a shady past. You find him entering into regions strictly off limits for kosher Jews. You find him touching people with leprosy. You find him cooking fish for his disciples on the seashore. You find him walking

“I felt my heart strangely warmed.”
- John Wesley
Jesus shows up in the most unexpected places.

down the roads of everyday life in our story.

Jesus shows up to all sorts of people in unexpected places. He shows up one afternoon in a garden when Augustine hears a mysterious child’s voice saying, “Pick it up and read.” He hurries to a friend with a Bible and opens to the first verse, which leads him to faith in Christ. Jesus shows up in a storm at sea to the captain of a slave ship named John Newton, author of the immortal hymn Amazing Grace. Jesus shows up one cool morning as C.S. Lewis was traveling to the Whipsnade Zoo in the sidecar of his brother’s motorcycle. Jesus shows up one hot, steamy night in a car belonging to Chuck Colson, former Watergate hatchet man. Colson had just listened to his friend, Tom Phillips, president of Raytheon, tell him about his newfound faith and Colson surrendered his life to Christ slumped over the steering wheel.


I shared with you, in a sermon recently, my improbable conversion to Christ. At age 19, I was no more looking for Christ than I was the man in the moon. Initially, I was reluctant to talk about my newfound faith. I didn’t have words yet to describe the change taking place in me.

The first time I told someone about the difference Christ made in my life, I was seated in a bar in Sandusky, Ohio. I was attending a summer gathering with guys from my fraternity. News had somehow spread that Pete had become “religious.” As we sat drinking our Budweiser’s, one buddy pressed me for details. “What gives with you, Pete,” he said. “I heard you’ve become religious.” I dodged him at first. It didn’t seem like the time or the place. Yet he wouldn’t let it go, so I swallowed hard and admitted for the first time to anyone my deep longing for God. I shared my hunger for greater meaning and purpose. I told him of my growing awareness of sin and my need for God’s mercy.

At the end, I sat back, relieved that it was over. His next words about knocked me off my car. “I want this kind of life also. I want to give my life to Christ. So what do I do?” As a neophyte, I fumbled with what to do next. I mumbled something about prayer and opening your heart to Jesus. So he bowed his head right there in the bar and did just that. I’ve thought about that dingy bar scene many times over the years. Jesus shows up in the most unexpected places. He’ll show up in your life if you’re open to the possibility.