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The Second Sunday of Easter

The Pastor's Reflection

This reflection by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson, D.Min., Ph.D. is also available in audio form on our "Pod Cast" site as part of a devotional service. To access it, click on the link at the top of the Sermons page.

Scripture Lesson: Luke 24:13-31

"When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight." (Luke 24:30-31)

Today is the second Sunday of the liturgical season of Easter (Easter, itself, is the first Sunday). Were we in church today, the paraments on the pulpit/lectern and the stole that I wear over my robe would be white, the liturgical color of this season, the color symbolic of resurrection and new life. This is why I wear a white stole when I conduct a funeral or memorial service. In addition, the large standing cross to the right of the chancel (which you can see in the photograph at the beginning of the email edition or this missive) would be draped in white cloth.

We begin our Easter season reflections today with Luke's description of Jesus' encounter with two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus.

In his last week with his disciples, Jesus tells them he is going to die. The disciples are confused and dismayed. Then Jesus tells them that this is not the end of the story. He tells them that just as a grain of wheat must fall into the ground and die to bear fruit, so, also, he needs to die to bear fruit. He tells them he will rise from the dead, that he will be present to them and to the world in a new way. It is doubtful whether the disciples understand this teaching or that after the crucifixion they even remember what he said.

Jesus is placed in the tomb shortly before sundown on Friday, the day he was crucified. Because the Jewish Sabbath begins at sundown, no work, including the burial of the dead, can take place on the Sabbath. Sometime between Friday night and Sunday morning Jesus rises from the dead. When the women arrive at the tomb shortly before dawn on the "first day of the week," they discover that the stone has been removed and the tomb is empty.

As I mentioned last week, it seems to me that the central message of our faith is not that Jesus died for us, though we believe that to be true. The central message is not that the tomb was empty, though we also believe that to be true. The central message is

not even the affirmation that Jesus rose from the dead, though we believe that to be true as well.

It seems to me that the central message of the Gospel, the cornerstone of our faith, is the proclamation that *Jesus lives*, that he lives in the world and also in us! The most important part of the Easter story is not Easter Sunday, but what happens *after* Easter Sunday. It is how, in their post-resurrection encounters with Jesus, Mary and the other disciples rediscover him--in the world and also in their lives.

This morning I would like to push this one step further. I think the central message of the Resurrection is not the proclamation, the *belief* that Jesus lives in the world and also in us. It is the *discovery* that Jesus lives in the world and also in us! When we discover or rediscover Jesus in our lives, resurrection is no longer a matter of religious belief; it is no longer a matter of religious doctrine or dogma; it becomes a matter of *personal experience*. When we discover or rediscover Jesus in the world and also within us, we will no longer believe; we will *know!*

Some people ask me how I got involved with Jungian psychology, why I felt drawn to it. Since I was a minister before I began to study psychology, before I became a psychologist, in the process of my theological education/development I viewed various psychological frameworks like Humanism, Existentialism, Behaviorism, Psychoanalysis, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, etc., from the perspective of how well they fit with, and, actually, how meaningfully they amplified my religious beliefs. For example, as helpful as Freud's psychology can be in understanding the personal unconscious, Freud's belief that religious faith is the expression of a neurotic adjustment to life, and, as such, it is to be outgrown and thrown aside as soon as possible, made this an unlikely candidate for a psychological perspective that could serve as the grounding or foundation for my pastoral counseling ministry.

In the later years of his life, C. G. Jung was interviewed by John Freeman of the BBC. Near the end of the interview, Freeman asks Jung if he believes in God. Jung pauses for a moment, smiles, and says, "I do not *believe*; I *know!*" I think this one simple statement, Jung's confession that he had experienced God's presence, the hand of God, the healing power of God in his life and in the life of the clients with whom he worked, sealed it for me. I knew I had found the psychological framework for my lifelong personal individuation process and a primary resource for my work with people.

This is why, although I appreciate the depth of the scholarship that one finds in the writings of some biblical scholars, this historical and literalistic way of looking at faith is not particularly helpful in my own faith development. When I read the writings of many modern theologians (not the former Dominican scholar Matthew Fox, by the way), it reminds me of something that someone once said--that the problem with many Christians is that they find Jesus in scripture or in the teachings of the church, and then they stop looking. If this is true of lay people as well as theologians, it might explain why some people come to church on Easter Sunday but not on any other Sundays during the year. Once we find him, we feel we don't have to search any longer!

When we examine the accounts of the post-resurrection experiences, we discover that the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John differ in their descriptions of what Jesus' followers experienced on "the first day of the week" (the day that we celebrate as Easter Sunday) and in the days that follow. The matter that the gospel accounts differ from each other apparently did not bother the early church leaders who selected the writings that comprised our present Bible. So much for the notion that there is only one way of understanding what, in its depths, is profound mystery!

In the Gospel of Mark, the first of the gospels to be written, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bring spices to the tomb to anoint the body. When they arrive, they discover that the stone that had sealed the entrance to the

tomb has been rolled away. A young man, dressed in a white robe, tells them that Jesus has been raised, that he is not here. The angel tells the women to tell the disciples that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee, where they will see him. The women have no direct encounter with Jesus at the tomb. Overcome with terror, they don't even do as the angel instructed. They say nothing about what they experienced to the disciples.

In the Gospel of Matthew, which was written approximately twenty years after the Gospel of Mark, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary go to the tomb. Suddenly there is a great earthquake as an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, comes and rolls back the stone. The angel tells the women not to be afraid for Jesus is not in the tomb; he has been raised. Once again, the women have no direct encounter with Jesus at the tomb. Jesus encounters them briefly while they are heading back to tell the disciples what has happened.

In the Gospel of Luke, which was written approximately the same time as the Gospel of Matthew, and which, like Matthew, drew from their own church traditions, from Mark's gospel, and also from a lost gospel that has been called Q (no connection to the deluded and dangerous Q Anon conspiracy theory), Mary and the other women see that the stone has been rolled away and that two men in dazzling clothes are sitting in the empty tomb. The men ask the women why they seek the living among the dead. This is a wonderful question: "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" They then remind the women how Jesus told them he would be handed over to sinners, be crucified, and rise again. According to Luke, the women tell the disciples of their experience, but the disciples do not believe them.

It is only in the gospel of John, the last of the gospels to be written, that Mary encounters Jesus at the tomb. Mary at first believes Jesus to be the gardener. It is only when Jesus calls her name that she recognizes him. Jesus tells her not to touch him because he has "not yet ascended to the Father." He then tells her to go to the other disciples and tell them that he is ascending "to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." Mary runs to tell the disciples that she has seen the Lord! John gives us no indication of how the disciples responded to this news.

As we heard in today's scripture lesson, later that very day two of Jesus' disciples are walking on the road to Emmaus. They are probably heading back home. Little more than a rumor spread by a woman had whispered its way out of the night of their despair. Though they are traveling in daylight, the two disciples dwell in darkness.

As they journey homeward, confused, depressed, lost, disillusioned, dejected, Jesus appears and walks along with them. The disciples see him and talk to him, but, for some reason, they do not recognize him.

In response to his disingenuous inquiry, the disciples tell their traveling companion what has happened. They tell him about the crucifixion. They mention how the women told them that their Lord has risen from the dead. Jesus patiently listens to their account. Finally, unable to restrain himself, he says, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe . . ."

In this statement Jesus implies that it is not because of a problem with their *eyes and ears* that they do not recognize him; *it is because of a problem with their heart*. Note that he does not accuse them of being *deaf and blind*, but of being "slow of heart." I think that is a profound observation or accusation! Perhaps, like the disciples, we should think about what it means to be "slow of heart," the impact that this spiritual impediment has on our faith as well as our relationships, our ability to give and receive love.

Why are the disciples unable to recognize Jesus? One option is that Jesus may have appeared to them in a human form, but in a slightly different human form. He may

not have looked like himself. This would explain why Mary did not recognize him at the tomb and why the disciples did not recognize their traveling companion. However, I am unable to understand why Jesus would reappear to his followers in a different human form, or why he would disguise himself in these encounters. The accounts of the post-resurrection encounters in scripture give us no reason to believe that this is what actually happened.

I would like to suggest another possibility. It is possible that Mary and the two disciples on the road to Emmaus don't see Jesus because they aren't looking for him. Because they aren't looking for him as a living presence in the world and in their lives, they see but they do not perceive, they see but they do not know what it is that they see. Their lack of belief, their lack of trust or faith prevents them from seeing what is right before their eyes!

These two disciples witnessed their Lord's crucifixion. They were there when his body was laid in the tomb. They are now in mourning; they have experienced a tremendous loss. However, contrary to what they believe, Jesus is not dead! He is not separate from them! He is with them that very moment! In fact, he is with them *even more fully* now that he has risen from the dead! He is with them wherever they go. As the story tells us, he is walking with them even when they believe they are walking alone.

If we are like the two disciples, if we, like them, are "slow of heart," if we do not see what is right before our eyes, we need to remember that Jesus is walking with us even when we believe we are walking alone.

When the two disciples sit at table with Jesus, when they break bread with him, their eyes are opened. They suddenly realize that they are actually in the presence of their Lord. First, they see with their heart, then they see with their eyes. Like the two disciples, when we see with our heart, we will be able to experience Jesus' presence. Then we will know the true meaning of Easter!

Note that the disciples are not looking for Jesus. This is probably why they don't see him or why they don't recognize him even when he is standing next to them. If we, like the disciples, are not looking for Jesus, it might explain why we never experience his presence. It might explain why we feel that we are walking the difficult and painful road of life alone, when in reality Jesus is walking with us, when Jesus is nearer to us than we are to ourselves.

We should take heart when we recall that even though the disciples weren't looking for Jesus, *Jesus was looking for them!* Even when they weren't attempting to approach Jesus through prayer or worship or the Sacrament of Holy Communion, Jesus was approaching them, was reaching out to them as they walked the dusty road to Emmaus. Like the disciples, even when we are not looking for Jesus, *Jesus is looking for us;* even when we are not reaching out to Jesus, *Jesus is reaching out to us!*

After their epiphany, the disciples realize that they cannot grasp or hold onto even this new and different experience of their Lord. As soon as they recognize him, he vanishes from their midst. They later encounter him in other ways and places. The eternal Christ is no longer limited by his incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth. There are now no limits to the ways that his followers might experience him, the places where they might see him.

How can we experience our risen Lord? We can experience him in worship and in the sacraments of the church. We can experience him in sacred music, in music that touches our souls. We can experience him on a deeply personal level in prayer. We can experience him in the love that we feel, the love that we receive. If we open both our mind and our heart, we may experience our risen Lord in some barely discernible

stirring within us. We may hear him speak to us, comfort us, heal us, and set our feet on the path he would have us walk.

Jesus promises us that those who truly seek will find. If we look for Jesus, we will find him. If we do not look, like the disciples, we will see but not perceive.

This weekend I participated in an online workshop or teach-in by the Jungian analyst Steven Herrmann and the Episcopal theologian Matthew Fox entitled *Psychology and Spirituality: William James, C. G. Jung, and Meister Eckhart in Dialogue*. As Steven noted, William James, the American philosopher, educator, and psychologist had a profound influence on Jung's psychology, and both of them found their grounding in the writings and sermons of the 13th century Dominican mystic Meister Eckhart. I won't be saying much about the teach-in right now, but rest assured—you will be hearing a lot not only about Jung but also about William James, Meister Eckhart, and Matthew Fox, whose recently published book on Eckhart is a masterpiece, for the next few months or so.

As I listened to the presentation on William James, my mind drifted to a passage from one of his books that illustrates the point that I am trying to make in this sermon: what it means to see deeply; what it means to see through the eyes of love.

In his book, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals*, James describes the difference between eyes that see with love and eyes that do not. He writes:

Every Jack sees in his own particular Jill charms and perfections to the enchantment of which we stolid onlookers are stone-cold. And who has the superior view of the absolute truth, he or we? Who has the more vital insight into the nature of Jill's existence as a fact? Is he in excess, being in this matter a maniac? Or are we in defect, being victims of a pathological anaesthesia as regards Jill's magical importance?

Surely the latter; surely to Jack are the profounder truths revealed; surely Jill's palpitating little life-throbs are among the wonders of creation, are worthy of this sympathetic interest; and it is to our shame that the rest of us cannot feel like Jack. For Jack realizes Jill concretely, and we do not. He struggles toward a union with her inner life, divining her feelings, anticipating her desires, understanding her limits as manfully as he can, and yet inadequately too, for he is afflicted with some blindness even here. Whilst we, dead clods that we are, do not even seek after these things, but are contented that the portion of eternal fact named Jill should be for us as if it were not.

Jill, who knows her inner life, knows that Jack's way of taking it--so importantly--is the true and serious way; and she responds to the truth in him by taking him seriously too. May the ancient blindness never wrap itself about either of them again! Where would any of us be, were there no one willing to know us as we really are or ready to repay us for our insight by making recognizant return? We ought, all of us, to realize each other in this intense, pathetic, and important way. (p. 266)

When we see others through the eyes of love, we see them differently. Our perception then shapes our relationship. The apostle Paul tells us that when we love we will be more patient and more kind. We will be less jealous and less possessive. We will be able to give in graciously and not insist on our own way. We will have hope, even in dark times, and we will be able to endure struggles that would destroy those who do not love.

If, as Jesus and Paul suggest, this is the way that God would like us to see each other, perhaps this is the way that God sees us. Perhaps God sees us through the eyes

of love! If this is true, then God sees deeply into us, sees how special we are just as Jack does with Jill, and that way of seeing helps our precious and unique life to unfold. Remember, if God sees us as special—we *are*, even if some people in our life don't see us this way. Perhaps God doesn't forgive or even overlook our flaws; perhaps what we call flaws don't even register with God.

When Jack looks at Jill through the eyes of love, I don't think that he sees her flaws but somehow manages to overlook them. I think he doesn't see her flaws, or, more precisely, he doesn't label her personality quirks as flaws. They are just her. She might be more extraverted than he is; she might be more histrionic; she might be more emotional. But these aren't flaws to Jack; they are just Jill. Jill, in turn, does not see Jack's introversion, his tendency to be a little obsessive compulsive, his rational analysis of everything as annoying, as flaws that she would like to either change or to which she must resign herself. This is just Jack. Neither one of them is perfect and neither one of them is expected to be perfect. Each of them is an unfolding mystery, a unique incarnation of God's creative spirit. Each of them is to be not only accepted but celebrated, because this is the way that God sees and feels toward each of them.

This matter of how we see, how we perceive also applies to the way we see and respond to life. We can dwell on what we call the bad parts and react with bitterness, anger and pessimism. Or we can respond to the givenness of life with love, understanding and compassion. It is a matter of which glasses we choose to wear. We create the world in which we live.

In our everyday lives, the choice is most often not between love and hate but between love and indifference. Martin Buber, the Jewish theologian, describes this as the difference between an "I-Thou" relationship and an "I-It" relationship.

The detached objectivity of "I-It" relationships has been overvalued in our culture. Men have paid the price for this in their retarded psychological development. Cool, detached objectivity was taught as the "professional" way for physicians, nurses, and psychotherapists to treat those under their care. But cool, detached objectivity does not build relationship, and loving, caring relationship is just as important as technology or technique in the healing process.

The existentialist philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche has said, "Cold gray eyes do not know the value of things." If you don't believe this, try looking at your spouse, your children, your friends, your pastor, or your church with cold gray eyes. See how quickly it will kill the relationship. Try looking at the refugees from Central America with cold gray eyes and see if it will move you to respond.

Matthew Fox's notion of what he calls "deep ecology," an ecology that finds its grounding in the spiritual dimension of life leads us to view our earth as a living organism and all the peoples of the world as our brothers and sisters. Our beliefs shape our perceptions, our perceptions shape our understanding, and our understanding shapes our response. This is why it is important that we view the events of our life and of life itself through the eyes of love.

If we see the world through the eyes of faith, we will see how Jesus is trying to create a world of peace, a community of caring and compassion. If we see through the eyes of faith, we will see the face of Jesus in our brothers and sisters. We will see Jesus in those who are hungry and thirsty, in those whose lives are torn apart by war, in those who, because of their sexual orientation or gender identity are outcasts in our society. We will see Jesus in the immigrant and in the refugee. We will even see Jesus in those whose actions have placed them outside the laws that govern our society, that have placed them in prison. We will see Jesus *even here*, and we cling to the hope that the prisoner will also come to see Jesus, to experience Jesus' presence, and that he/she will be transformed through this experience.

If we see through the eyes of faith, we will see ourselves as children of God and then become not only disciples but also apostles. Out of our realization of our own inner beauty, our realization that God loves us as we are—as *we are*, we will answer Jesus' call to care for those around the world who are hungry and thirsty, those who lack medical care, those who have been displaced from their homes and their homelands. We will welcome the social outcast into our lives and into our church. We will do this because we know that inasmuch as we do it to one of the least of these, we do it to Jesus.

Mother Teresa says it best. She once said that she, her fellow Missionaries of Charity and the many volunteers that minister with them to the destitute and dying of Calcutta do not believe they are carrying out their ministry *in the name of Jesus*; they believe they are actually *ministering to Jesus*. I would add that they not only believe this; they *know* it to be true. This, my friends, is what true Christian faith looks like!

We, like Mary and the disciples, like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, are post-resurrection Christians. As post-resurrection Christians, as followers of the Way, let us pray that Jesus will open our eyes, that we will not only see but actually perceive, that we will recognize our risen Lord in every corner of our lives. Let us pray that, like the disciples, we will see the glimpses of truth that are revealed to us, that the slowness of our hearts might be quickened, and that we might be set free from everything that holds us back from fullness of life. As we rediscover Jesus, we will rediscover ourselves in new and powerful ways.

As we journey forth in this Easter season and throughout the seasons of our lives, let us never stop looking for Jesus.