

Where Jesus Appears among Us Now  
John 20:19-23

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*When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Jn. 20:19*

The sanctuary is empty as I deliver this sermon. One day last week one of you asked me in a Zoom meeting if it is hard to preach in an empty sanctuary. It is not as difficult as it may seem. I was taught long years ago to imagine the congregation in my mind's eye when I sit down at my desk to write a sermon, so imagining you now as I preach is not altogether different.

As I am imagining you today I am picturing that you are a people who have the biblical texts and who possess the Christian doctrine. You could, without a Bible before you, tell in your own words the story I read from The Gospel according to John moments ago. You not only have the texts you have the faith that believes what scripture teaches. You believe the resurrected Lord of Easter is with us now and every day. You don't need anyone to tell you the text or teach you that big of doctrine or any of the other fundamentals of the faith.

Where you would like help, though, I imagine, is in knowing how to apply scripture and the fundamentals of the faith to the present circumstances that confront us. With that in mind I am starting today a set of sermons all using biblical accounts of post-resurrection appearances of Jesus and bringing them into our present situation. I am calling the series "Religion in Life: Practicing the Faith in a Difficult Hour."

I begin this morning with the conviction that you believe Jesus entered that locked room where the disciples had quarantined themselves after the crucifixion. Along with believing Christ appeared to them you also believe Christ is with you now. And yet you wonder how to recognize and point to his presence. How does the Risen Christ pass through COVID-closed doors and make himself known? That is the question I want to work at answering this morning.

As a way of answering that question I offer you my testimony. I will indicate to you some places where I feel as though Jesus is present to me in my anxieties around the "Safer at Home" order that has the church all but shuttered and life disrupted. I don't for a moment suggest you have to see Jesus in exactly the same way I believe I am seeing him, but I offer my experience as a way of possibly stimulating your imaginations to see Jesus in your way and in your lives. Here, then, is what seeing Jesus is looking like to me now.

*I believe Christ is appearing in my reading.*

In the first days of our COVID closure I was at a loss about what to do. There isn't a class in seminary about how to lead a church and be its pastor through a pandemic that shuts everything down, keeps everyone inside, and prevents them from being at the church. The few

things I could think to do all wanted to be done at once, and that made for a different kind of worry. I don't mind saying I was feeling stunned and overwhelmed. Defeat seemed pretty close at hand.

Then one night I happened to pick up and read a thin little book I was given for Christmas and hadn't gotten to yet. It was about the Pack Horse Librarians of Kentucky.<sup>1</sup> I had never heard of the pack horse librarians before. It was a program of the New Deal, FDR's scheme to pull the country out of the Great Depression. The Pack Horse Librarians of Kentucky consistently mostly of young women who bravely rode horseback on regular routes into the mountains of rural Kentucky carrying books and magazines to the impoverished people who were hungry for learning and culture and contact with the outside world. Children might see them off in the distance and start hollering to their classmates or their families, "The book woman's coming! The book woman's coming!" The work of the Pack Horse Librarians of Kentucky was desperately hard, desperately needed, and greatly appreciated. All that to say that, as I was reading about them that night, it was as if Jesus was leaping off the page to me saying, "If those women could carry books and education on horseback to the mountain people, surely you can use the means at your disposal to carry the Word of God to people stuck at home today." And suddenly I had courage and hope. Christ broke through my closed doors and appeared.

On the first Saturday of the "Safer at Home" business I took from my library a book from 1918. Between its covers is a set of lectures delivered in the Spring of 1918 to a group of ministers and soon-to-be-ministers. The lectures were by a pastor. The context for the lectures was the devastation by WWI. The lecturer did not mention the flu epidemic, but that had to have been in his mind, too. The subject was *In a Day of Social Rebuilding* and the question addressed was how to go about being the church in a world that had been blown apart by war smashing hope to smithereens. One by one the chapters in the book make the point that it is a drastic new day but the church is up to the challenge because it has in its toolbox the resources that are needed: a message of reconciliation, worship, teaching, evangelism, organization, and friendship.<sup>2</sup> Jesus was again leaping off the pages and I read the book in a day. COVID crisis: "Safer at Home": suspended schedules and all the rest notwithstanding: the church has got this because the church has what it takes: a message worth hearing, and worship, teaching, evangelism, organization, and friendship.

My point is that I discern Jesus has been using things I love – reading and books about reading and books about ministry – to make himself known to me. And he may take things and subjects you love – baking or sewing or woodworking or whatever – and use them to make himself known to you. To see Christ today, look in the places that you love.

*I believe Christ is appearing in my seeing.*

He is showing up in my casual observations. Here are several examples.

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<sup>1</sup> Kathi Appelt and Jeanne Cannella Schmitzer, *Down Cut Shin Creek: The Pack Horse Librarians of Kentucky* (Cynthiana, KY: Purple House Press, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Henry Sloane Coffin, *In a Day of Social Rebuilding* (New Haven: Yale, 1918). Morgan Noyes Phelps, *Henry Sloane Coffin: The Man and His Ministry* (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), p. 135 supplies the detail that the lectures were given in the Spring of 1918.

I go to the Post Office a couple of times a week. The church's mailbox is full nearly every time I go. It teems with envelopes. I don't open them but I know they are contributions sent for deposit with our financial secretaries. Every time I unlock the church's mailbox it is as though the Lord himself appears and says, "Don't be afraid."

Sherrol has been firing up our Internet at home to participate in the Sunday morning Zoom meetings of the Prophets and Apostles, the youngest grades of our Sunday School. I haven't been participating in that they way Sherrol has been, but I can hear from the other room to love the teachers have for the children and the delight the children have in seeing their friends and in singing their songs. Christ is alive in that.

Our staff members and lay leaders have been diligently working to conduct other meetings and programs over the Internet through Zoom. I am part of some but not all. The business that happens is quite secondary. The delight you have in seeing one another and the strength you find in leaning into one another are primary. The church can't gather but the fellowship is living and in that living fellowship Christ is alive and showing himself to me.

The faithfulness that makes these recorded services possible is tremendous. I regularly receive works of appreciation for doing them, but I could not do it alone. I can talk from the pulpit with one tonsil tied behind my back, but if these services relied solely on me there would be no music, no audio, no visual, no Youtube link. The people who are making this possible are signs to me of the presence of the living God.

And numbers of you – numbers and numbers of you – are asking about others, asking if there is anyone who needs help. Every one of these offers, every expression of concern, is to my mind something of the appearance of Jesus.

Here my point is that Jesus is taking the things I am seeing in my daily activities and using them to make himself known. Similarly, he may show up in your daily round even under these "Safer at Home" constraints. He could be in people you see or in nature you observe. To see Christ, look around you.

You believe Christ is present with you. You know the scriptures that say he is. But you may wonder how that faith you hold and how those scriptures you know manifest themselves in the life you live, particularly under these circumstances. Where is the living Christ behind the doors that are closed now?

It is a hard question but not unanswerable. I've tried to tell you how I think Christ is showing up in my reading and in my seeing. May this testimony of mine stimulate your thinking and help you grow in your seeing and believing.