

Finding Jesus in the Everyday
John 21: 1-14
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After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, or Galilee. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples.

Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

I'll never forget the first time I watched a movie with my son Nolan. He was barely three years old and we curled up on the couch to watch **Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs**. After a rather convoluted yet quite entertaining battle between the good guys and a planet made entirely of food that has the power to destroy the earth, our hero comes up with a plan to save the world. He

executes the plan to perfection, and we watch as the evil planet goes up in flames. The only problem is that our hero is still on the planet. He has sacrificed himself so that the rest of the world might live.

Now, I've seen enough movies to realize that this is not how the story ends—particularly an animated film for kids. I waited patiently for our star to climb out of the rubble, embrace the girl, reunite with his estranged father and receive a hero's welcome in the hometown that never understood him. But Nolan had never seen a movie before. He had no expectations. He certainly didn't know this was the surprise twist that precedes the happy ending. So he burst into tears! I reassured him – it's going to be okay! Just wait—any minute now...here he comes—and --spoiler alert – of course our hero made it! He managed to fling himself off the planet just in time. He climbed up, hacking and coughing and a wee bit singed, but otherwise ok. Yay! Our happy ending!

We've heard the story of Jesus' resurrection so many times that we know to wait for the happy ending. At the Good Friday family service, we close with reassuring words. "We've just heard a sad story," we tell the kids, "but Easter is coming! Anticipate the joy – it's right around the corner!" But in the real world, death usually does have the last word.

So the disciples had no reason to expect a miracle. Sure, Jesus had hinted at it, but they were never very quick on the uptake. Jesus died a brutal and prolonged death. The tomb slammed shut. Why would there be an epilogue? Why would joy come in the morning?

And that's why it makes perfectly good sense that they just got back to business. The Passover and Jesus' death behind them, they return to work. Back to what they know – fishing – and presumably providing for their families, living in their communities.

They are back on the job, and the last thing they expect to see is Jesus. Even though WE know that Jesus is alive, we would not expect to see him here either. Jesus was just resurrected from the dead, for goodness' sake! We might expect that our hero would present himself to the religious authorities or

to the Roman government. But does he? No! Does he make lengthy speeches or perform showy miracles? Does he provide org charts and governance procedures for a church that will bear his name? No! Repeatedly, he spends time with his friends – his closest followers. He breaks bread. He hangs out. His post resurrection appearances look more like Youth Group than church leadership.

But here's the thing: Whatever happened during this time, whatever experiences the disciples had with their resurrected Lord, it was powerful enough to transform them forever. These people who had abandoned Jesus--- who walked away when the going got tough---were prepared to re-commit their lives to Jesus' work, even to their own deaths.

And I wonder if this is the point for us today, as well. I want to share with you a shift that I think is happening in the church – one that gives me and many of my colleagues new energy and hope. We are realizing that lives are transformed and people come to Christ when we **experience** Christ. Certainly we all grow in our faith and many of us are transformed by talking or reading about Jesus, so I am not discounting that at all. But, if you think about something that you are really passionate about – something that has changed your life – I would guess that it is something you've experienced personally and deeply. Perhaps you are passionate about tennis or skiing – your grandchildren -- playing the piano or exploring the world's wine regions. My passion is my family. My husband's is Michigan football (and his family of course)!

Take a minute and think of something that you are passionate about. Picture it for a second.

Whatever you are picturing, my guess that it is something you have **lived**. If, for example, your passion is the Chicago Bears, you didn't become a fan just because someone told you about the games or because you read a Wikipedia entry about the team.

You go to games, probably alongside friends and maybe family who raised you with this passion. You have stories of your own to tell. The mention of

“da Bears” brings back visceral memories. You recall a breathtaking hail Mary pass that won a game or your first time at Soldier Field as a kid.

You hear the crowds and the announcer’s voice in your memory. You recall the smell hot dogs or burgers on the grill and you feel the chill of tailgating. It is powerful to you **because you lived it.**

One of the pastors and scholars thinking about faith in this way is John Vest – I worked with John when I was a member at Fourth Presbyterian Church, downtown, and John’s wonderful work with youth and their families has propelled him into thinking about Christianity in a whole new way. And, unlike many who bemoan the “death” of church as we know it, John is fired up about the new possibilities.

John is also a huge Star Wars fan, and when I heard him speak earlier this year, he used the new Star Wars movie to illustrate this shift.

In the original Star Wars, Han Solo was the skeptic. While Luke and Obi Wan are discussing the Jedi, Han makes it clear he has no use for these old stories about the Jedi and the force – all he needs is his blaster and his ship—the Millenium Falcon -- things you can see and touch.

But in the new Star Wars, The Force Awakens, Han has changed roles. Now he is the one telling a new generation about the Force. When the main character asks, “The Jedi were real?” Han Solo replies,

“I used to wonder about that myself. Thought it was a bunch of mumbo-jumbo. A magical power holding together good and evil...the dark side and the light. Crazy thing is...it’s true. The Force. The Jedi. All of it. It’s all true.”

John asks “What changed for Han?”

“It wasn’t that Obi Wan Kenobi spent some extra time with him off-screen explaining doctrine. It wasn’t that he heard some old stories over and over

again. What changed for Han? He *lived* it. He now knows that the Force is real because he *experienced* it. It changed his life. It changed the galaxy.”¹

John’s point is so simple and yet it runs counter to so much of what we do as Christians. We forget that lives are transformed through experience. We use beliefs and doctrines and statements of faith to help bring clarity to our world, but I would argue that it is **experience** of God that changes lives. So now take a minute and think of a time when you experienced God in your life.

Some of you might be dismayed to realize that you can’t think of a moment – that’s okay. That’s true for many of us-please don’t think that this story isn’t for you.

Some of you may recall a feeling or sensation. Maybe there was a moment or a phase of life where you felt particularly close to God. These moments may have happened in far-away places – a minister friend of mine tells a story of being on a mountain in Nepal and feeling Jesus’ presence in the wind and the stars of a solitary night. These moments may occur in all-too-ordinary places – another friend tells of a time where he encountered the Holy Spirit in the halls of his consulting firm, and he knew that God was guiding him through a gut-wrenching reorganization of our workplace. And for many of us, these moments occur in church – whether through the awe of beautiful spaces or the joy of uplifting music. Over the years, members of the Moms’ Bible Study have recalled times where, in this beautiful community of women, they have had a moment of peace and stillness that jolted them into feeling God’s presence in our room.

This year, as we’ve been reading the 40 Bible Stories together, many of you have told us that – for the first time, perhaps – you are experiencing the Bible not as “lessons” or “readings” but as vivid and life-changing stories. The Bible is filled with people who experienced God for themselves. People who encountered God in a burning bush, or a small still voice, or in their risen Lord. And their lives were so changed by these experiences that they wanted to tell the stories.

¹ <http://johnvest.com/2015/10/20/the-spiritual-evolution-of-han-solo/>

Most of us will never see a burning bush or encounter Jesus on the beach. Yet, I think that we can meet God in our lives. But it's a huge risk-I get that. What if we put ourselves out there and we don't experience God. What if there's nothing? Or what if there's something but we can't make sense of it. A lot of bad theology has come out of our all-too-human desire to boil God down into something that we can wrap our heads around.

But I think that Jesus wants to be with us. I've read this story dozens of times, and this is the first time that I realized something: Jesus is there, on the beach, cooking breakfast, whether the disciples join him or not. That cold dawn, while the disciples had gone fishing, Jesus waited. Did he feel the cold? We don't know. Did he gather charcoal for himself? He kindled a fire. Somehow he baked bread. Perhaps he kneaded it himself and sat back to let it rise while he enjoyed the light and warmth. Or perhaps the dough miraculously appeared and baked itself over the flames. Somehow he found fish, and watched the sizzle of the hot coals. Sure, he blessed the disciples with a miraculous catch, but he wasn't relying on it. Breakfast was ready and the table was set.

Jesus was already present. Whether or not the disciples saw him, Jesus was there. Jesus is ready and waiting, my friends! He's waiting to nourish us. To give us strength. To sit with us, and just be. Do we see him? Maybe...maybe not. But he's there. We don't have to DO anything to get him to come – we just have to notice.

So for all us frazzled and busy folks, isn't this good news?! What if we just asked God to help us notice. To help us pay attention. This is something we can do – and the best part is, we can do it right where we are. We don't have to wake before dawn and find a solitary spot on the beach. Jesus went to the beach because that's where his disciples were. And he is coming to you, wherever you are.

So what if we just asked God to help us notice? What if we prayed a very simple prayer?

Jesus, be present to me today. Be present to me at breakfast. Be present during this morning's commute. Be present to me at yoga class.

God, help me feel your presence at work today. Be present to me in the carpool line. God, be present at the grocery store. Help me, God, to feel your presence at the quarterly meeting.

Holy Spirit, you are with me as I stand in line at the DMV. Help me believe it. Help me experience it.

Spirit, let me feel your presence today at work. Let me feel your presence on the playground. Be with me at the Home Depot. Holy Spirit, I am still at the DMV. Please, stick with me.

We can do this. We do it all the time with the kids in Sunday School. And in our family, we have what we call "hey, God" prayers. These came about because I asked the kids to remember me in prayer one day – they insisted that school was "way too busy" and they wouldn't have time. "Surely you have time to say, 'hey, God—remember my mom today,' right?"

And the secret behind reminding children to do this is that it is every bit as important for the grown-ups. **I** need to go into each day asking where I might encounter Jesus. And **I** need to wonder, at the end of each day, where I might have met him. Whether I saw his face in those around me. Whether I experienced his presence in the "least of these" – by giving my time and energy to really engage with people I met throughout the day. And perhaps, if I created a few moments of peace and quiet, whether or not I heard Jesus in a small still voice.

When we say "Christ is risen," friends, we don't mean that he rose, only to die again. We mean that he rose so that he could live forever and ever. And he did this so that we could be with him, forever and ever. So let's go out into our lives each day looking -- confident that he is waiting for us. AMEN.