

April 22, 2007/Third Sunday of Easter/David L. Edwards

Experiencing the Living Christ

John 21:1-19 *Now none of the disciples dared to ask him,
“Who are you?” because they knew it was the Lord.*

We speak of the historical figure Jesus of Nazareth who lived, taught, healed, performed various amazing things, and was crucified by order of the Roman occupying power. The “living Christ” is how we speak of the continuing influence, spirit, presence of Jesus of Nazareth whose life and teachings are for us the way, the truth and the life. We may not have too much trouble talking about Jesus, but it is sometimes difficult to speak of the living Christ. What are we talking about? What is the living Christ like? More importantly, how do we touch this reality of the living Christ?

The rather long story from John’s gospel for this morning speaks to this question. The disciples have difficulty recognizing the presence of the risen Christ. He is the same, but not the same. They know him, and yet they just can’t be sure. I think this is deliberate on John’s part as he tells these stories. I think he knows that the community of the living Christ in his own day and time needed to hear the message of Christ’s continuing presence with them. And yet that presence is not easy to discern. It is for them and for us a mystery that we seek, yet which is, in the end, revealed to us along the way of our living the life of discipleship.

The disciples, led by Peter, go back to fishing. Their leader is dead. The flush of excitement about his being somehow still alive, or alive in a new way, seems to be fading. They don’t seem to know what to do with themselves, so they go back to the only thing they DO know—their fishing business. That’s what they were doing when Jesus first encountered them. The story, in this sense, goes back to the beginning, yet it will be a new beginning.

The disciples are out in their boat, not far from shore. They hear a voice from the beach: “Lads, have you caught nothing?” They don’t recognize him as Jesus. “No,” they answer. Jesus tells them to try the other side of the boat. They give it a try, throw their nets the other way, and sure enough haul in a huge catch. Peter is told by “the beloved disciple”—John, the author of the gospel—that it is Jesus. He jumps in the water, and swims ashore. The rest follow in the boat.

They don’t recognize Jesus until they try what he tells them to do. In the gospel stories, the fishermen disciples never catch anything unless Jesus is with them. With Jesus, their lives gain fruitfulness and abundance, and move in life-giving directions. The message seems to be that with Jesus there is abundant life. Not prosperity the way we hear it proclaimed by popular, culture-shaped Christianity, but fullness of life

in the sense of what John says earlier in his gospel: God loved the world so much that God sent the Son so that all who believed in him should have eternal life (3:16). Life as it is meant to be lived and experienced, the way God made us to live. Life in all its fullness, now and forever. That is what we experience and learn in Jesus' presence.

The disciples' efforts are fruitless until they listen to Jesus and do what he asks. It is not that they are helpless and can do nothing on their own. It is just that in Jesus' company, following him, their lives find the fullness they are meant to have. So we can say that we become aware of the presence of the living Christ as we listen to him, to his teachings, his life, and do what we hear. We find out for ourselves the life to which he points us. This first story really has a simple point—the way to belief is through obedience, through listening and doing. The disciples become aware of the risen Christ as they trust his word and cast out their nets. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote (COST OF DISCIPLESHIP) that only those who believe obey, and only those who obey believe. Knowing the living Christ is not about having a mystical experience or reaching an intellectual conclusion. It is about being open to Christ revealing himself as we live the life to which he calls us.

The second part of the story finds Jesus on the beach cooking up some fish. We don't know where he got his fish. John is not the least concerned with that detail. Maybe Jesus did a little fishing of his own! He invites the disciples to bring some of their catch and join him for breakfast. Next comes the most interesting sentence in this whole story: "Now none of the disciples dared ask him, 'Who are you?' because they knew it was the Lord." I love that sentence! It is pure ambiguity, just like the life of faith itself! Part answer, but mostly questions. A little bit of knowledge and a whole lot of wonder and puzzlement and mystery. The disciples don't want to ask Jesus who he is because they know it is him. What an affirmation of exactly where we find ourselves as Jesus' followers today! We know and don't know his presence. We are sure and yet not sure. We see and yet we don't see. And that's okay! It's more than okay—it's the nature of the life of faith.

Remember what Jesus said to Thomas in the earlier resurrection story? "Thomas, did you have to see and touch my wounds before you believed? How much better off are those who don't see and yet believe." Believing doesn't mean head knowledge or having iron-clad proof or hard-shelled convictions. It means giving our lives to following Jesus. It means living as a disciple of the living Christ with trustful, open hearts and minds, finding out for ourselves the truth of his teachings as we put them into practice. Believing is an act of our whole life, not just our head.

Now they share a meal together. This scene recalls all the meals and the special meal Jesus shared with those who gathered around him to learn and to follow the way he was showing. This is a Eucharistic scene. When we share the Eucharist, or the Lord's Supper, it is the closest we come to the presence of the living Christ. In the bread, in the cup, in our sharing with each other. It opens the eyes of our hearts and

minds to awareness of Christ's presence with us, in us, and among us, and to ourselves as his community.

I come from a tradition, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), that practices the Lord's Supper as the central act of every service of worship. And it is for this reason, that in nothing else that we do together as Christ's community is his presence more vividly known. Meals were very important to Jesus. No meal was common or ordinary. There are so many mealtime stories in the gospels. Jesus makes mealtimes a special vehicle of our awareness of his presence, of God, and of the sacredness of life. In "doing" these meals together we know his presence with us still. So again, Jesus is known as we DO something, as we engage in some dimension of the life to which he calls us as his community.

Finally, Jesus asks Peter to take a walk. John allows us to listen in on this intimate conversation because it has to do with us as well as with Peter. Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him. In the Greek text, Jesus uses one word for love—*agape*—and Peter uses a different word—*phileo*. Scholars and preachers make a big deal of this. My favorite scholar of John's gospel is Raymond Brown, and I go with him—it doesn't ultimately matter! Maybe Peter didn't understand the kind of love Jesus meant. Maybe Jesus was trying to evoke a deeper, different kind of love from Peter. But there's no way of knowing that. It comes down simply to the centrality of love as the essential aspect of discipleship. Loving Jesus means devoting ourselves to him and the way of life he shows us. It is making that love, and nothing else, the forming center of our lives.

Peter ends up with hurt feelings because Jesus seems to be questioning his love. This scene can be understood as a rehabilitation of Peter, who in Luke's gospel denied his relationship with Jesus three times after Jesus' arrest. He likely was terrified that he would be swept up in a Roman dragnet as one of Jesus' followers. This may be true. Jesus doesn't give up on Peter and doesn't give up on us. He doesn't write us off because our fears overwhelm us sometimes when following him puts us at odds with the status quo.

Jesus accepts Peter's profession of love. Then he connects it three times with leadership. If you love me, then feed my sheep, care for my community, nurture others who choose to follow me. Jesus gives Peter authority, not the kind that orders people around but the authority of compassion and responsibility for the well-being of the community.

What Jesus says to Peter he says to each of us. Do you love me? If you love me, feed my sheep, take responsibility for the well-being of my community. In the Protestant tradition, we believe that every person is called by Jesus to discipleship and the kind of servant leadership, or ministry, Jesus is talking about. When we make a commitment to following the living Christ, we at the same time become part of a community of that commitment and love. This means sharing the authority and

responsibility Jesus meant when he said, “Feed my sheep.” It means that we grow up into a new and different way of seeing ourselves and others. Others are not there for me to use or abuse for my own purposes. The community is not there for me to exert my will over it or demand that others see things the way I see them or do things the way I do them. I become a sharer in the responsibility for the care, nurture, and well-being of the community of faith of which I am a part.

In the Church of the Covenant, we talk about ultimate responsibility. When a person commits to Covenant Membership, along with particular spiritual practices, he or she accepts ultimate responsibility for the church, the community. Its well-being. Its ministry. Its financial needs. And so forth. It is becoming a servant leader who sees beyond one’s own ego needs and desires to the needs of the community as it lives out its faithfulness to Christ. I think this is true for all of us who become part of this community. It means accepting a share in this ultimate responsibility, this commitment to the community and its life and ministry. The Church of the Covenant has always offered this view of “church membership,” not having our names on a church role and expecting certain “services,” but committing ourselves to a community and accepting responsibility for its life, beginning with accepting responsibility for our own lives of discipleship to the living Christ.

So the living Christ is known to us as we, like the fishermen disciples, trust Jesus’ guidance and leading—“Cast your nets on the other side!” He is known to us in the mealtimes we share as his community, especially the Eucharist. And he is known to us as we live out our love for him in caring for his community, bearing responsibility for its well-being and integrity AS a community of Christ. How do we know the living Christ? We know him and don’t know him. We see but don’t see. Yet the only way to see him, to know him is to live the life to which he has called us, and along the way he will reveal himself to us again and again. For this reason, the last words Jesus speaks to Peter in this story, and to us, are: “Follow me.”