

April 14, 2013 / Third Sunday of Easter / David L. Edwards

The Presence of 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 Jesus of Nazareth who lived, taught, healed, gathered a community of disciples, and was crucified by order of the Roman occupying power. The living Christ is the way we speak of the continuing influence, spirit, and presence of Jesus, helping us wake up to and live out our true humanity. Talking about Jesus may be easier than speaking of the living Christ. What is the living Christ like? How do we experience the living Christ?

The beautiful stories from John’s gospel for this morning speak to these questions. 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 can’t be sure. John knew that the community of his own day and time needed to hear the message of Jesus’ continuing presence with them. Yet, he also knew it was not easy to discern or define. In the end, the living Christ is a mystery revealed to us as together we live the life of discipleship.

The disciples are at loose ends. Their leader is dead. They cannot yet grasp the reality of his resurrection. Not knowing what to do with themselves, they go back to the thing they DO know--fishing. The story seems to circle back to the beginning, to the Sea of Galilee, also called Tiberius, where the disciples were when Jesus first called them. Listen to these lovely, yet poignant, words of a hymn by William A. Percy (1885-1943): *They cast their nets in Galilee, just off the hills of brown./Such happy, simple fisherfolk before the Lord came down./Contented, peaceful fishermen, before they ever knew/the peace of God that filled their hearts brimful, and broke them too.* They are back at the beginning, but with hearts brimful and broken. They have seen too much, known too much to ever really go back. Yet what will they do now?

The disciples are out in their boat, not far from shore. They hear a voice from the beach: “Lads, have you caught anything?” They don’t recognize him as Jesus. “No,” they answer. “Try the other side of the boat.” They throw their nets the other way, and get a huge

catch. John, “the beloved disciple” and author of the gospel, exclaims that it is Jesus. Peter plunges into the water and swims ashore. The rest follow in the boat.

They don’t recognize Jesus until they do what he tells them to do. In the gospel stories, the fishermen disciples never catch much unless Jesus is with them. With Jesus, their lives are fruitful and abundant, and move in life-giving directions. With Jesus there is abundant life. Not the prosperity, material or spiritual, that is hawked 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 we were created to live it, in all its fullness, now and forever. That is what we experience and learn in Jesus’ presence.

The disciples’ efforts are fruitful as 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 story has a simple point—the way to belief is through obedience, a word that literally means listening and then doing what we hear. 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 some kind of supernatural experience. Neither is it about having a head full of information about Jesus or Christianity. We don’t become a Christian by thinking our way through to belief. It is about being open to Jesus, the living Christ, who reveals himself as we live the life to which he calls us. As we obey, as we listen and respond, we believe, we touch the presence of the living Christ.

A friend who is the spiritual leader, or *shaykh*, of a Sufi community told me of a conversation with someone who wanted to work with their community and learn about Sufism. The *shaykh* wanted things to be very clear. You can study and learn about Sufi Islam, he said, but if you come here, you need to be prepared to live it. That is what we try to be about here, as well. We are not really about studying Christianity, or learning about Christianity, though study and learning are an important part of our disciplines. We commit ourselves to living it, and learning and growing through living it. It is not a head trip. It is a life’s journey.

The second part of the story finds Jesus on the beach cooking up some fish. 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! You see, if you are looking for pat and clear answers, if you want things nailed down and packaged neatly, you are probably in the wrong place. Everything is part answer, but mostly question. 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. I get very uneasy around those who feel that they know exactly who Jesus is and where he is and what his program is! When we think we know, we stop paying attention. We close down around a bunch of dogmas and ideas. We are no longer open to the living Christ.

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.

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. 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. 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*. Maybe Peter didn't understand the kind of love Jesus meant. Maybe Jesus was trying to evoke a deeper, richer kind of love from Peter, but there's no way of knowing. It comes down simply to this: the life of faith as discipleship is a matter of love. Loving Jesus and the way of life he shows us. Letting that love, and nothing else, be the forming center of our lives. Loving Jesus is not sentimentalism or religious emotionalism. It is cherishing and living out the way, the truth, the life that we receive and come to know in Jesus.

Jesus accepts Peter's profession of love, and he connects it three times with service to others. 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. 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 here to meet my needs or for me to exert my will over it. I drop my 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. And as I do that, I am nurturing the ministries of the community.

In the Church of the Covenant, when we commit to membership, along with particular spiritual practices, we accept responsibility for the church, the community. Its well-being. Its ministry. Its financial needs. And so forth. We become willing to grow toward seeing beyond

our own ego needs and desires to the needs of the community as it lives out its faithfulness to Jesus. We commit ourselves to a community, sharing responsibility for its life, and sharing the gift of ourselves and our particular gifts.

The living Christ is known to us as we, like the fishermen disciples, listen and respond to Jesus' teaching and guiding—"Cast your nets on the other side!" He is known to us in the mealtimes and fellowship we share as his community, especially the Eucharist. And he is known to us as we deepen in our love for him and live out that love in caring for his community. We know him and don't know him. We see but don't see. Yet the 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. The last words Jesus, the living Christ, speaks to Peter, and to us, in this story are the same as those he spoke when it all began: "Follow me."