

Sermon

The Rev. Noah Van Niel

St. John the Evangelist

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Easter 3 (B): Acts 3:12-19; Psalm 4; 1 John 3:1-7; Luke 24:36b-48

I love a good mystery. Though, to be fair, I'm not half as obsessed with whodunits as my wife, Melinda, is. So that means in our house, when we can manage the time, we watch a lot of Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, or other master sleuths going about their trade; using their brains and idiosyncratic charm to outwit the bad guys (or girls).

The thrill of these stories, be they Conan Doyle or Christie, always comes at the end. When, through using those "little gray cells," the brilliant detective pronounces, "I know who did it." And everyone gathers around for the great reveal. The detectives then run through the story we have all just seen or read, but highlight certain details anyone else would have overlooked. Lost amidst the cacophony of information, they have an ability to take it all in, determine what is relevant, what is important, and how it connects. That is their great genius. And from these seemingly unrelated fragments they piece together a mosaic of evidence that points to the guilty party. The rush of watching these climactic scenes is the rush we get from someone smarter than us telling us how it all fits together, and what it all means.

In today's gospel passage Jesus has his turn for a climactic reveal. In Luke's post-crucifixion account the women find the tomb empty, but don't see Jesus. He then only appears to two peripheral disciples on the way to Emmaus. This passage is his first appearance to the whole group. You can see how they might have been both "startled and terrified." And after showing himself to them, and letting them poke and prod him to see if he was really there, and having some lunch with them, we get the Sherlock Holmes, or Hercule Poirot moment. Jesus takes them back through their time together and explains, how everything, from what he was saying and doing, to what had been written in their scriptures, should have clued them in to the fact that he was going to be resurrected from the dead. "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you," he says. "That everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day.'" Jesus is putting all the pieces together for them, making it all make sense.

The trick of these mystery novels, of course, is that it is virtually impossible to know, in the moment, what is important and what is not; what is relevant to the bigger picture, and what is merely coincidence. There's a reason that Holmes and Poirot are a) fictional and b) unique within their fictional world. No doubt there are very bright people out there who can see patterns in a morass of otherwise meaningless details, but the more common experience is that things only piece together, or look clear in retrospect. Hindsight is 20/20, as they say.

The same was true with the disciples' experience of Jesus. It's not that the signs were there and they didn't know how to read them, they didn't even know they were signs! There's a great irony that in our reading from Acts, Peter is the one lecturing the Israelites about how they "acted in ignorance" when they killed Jesus, since he famously suffered that same ignorance and couldn't process the fact that, by his own admission, Jesus was the Messiah, but somehow the suffering and death the Messiah was predicted to undergo was unacceptable. It is only after Jesus' resurrection that those things make sense; that those scriptural fragments piece together into a coherent narrative and Peter has his big "Aha!" moment.

The same is often true for us. Because we are so busy, or so distracted, or so stressed, or so oblivious, it can be very hard, in the moment, to notice where Jesus is, how he is appearing to us. And as a result, Jesus is often glimpsed most clearly in the rearview mirror. This means that times of reflection—thinking back over our lives and marking those moments that, in retrospect, we could see Jesus’ gentle, guiding hand at work in our life—are essential. There’s a certain thrill in that reflective work. The same thrill that comes from a great mystery writer drawing together all the pieces into a coherent whole. “So *that’s* why that happened?” or “So *that’s* what that was about! That was Jesus, and I didn’t even know it.” To look back across our lives and notice moments of course correction, or warning, or serendipity or unearned blessing is to look back and see Jesus waving to you from the side of the road after you’ve already driven by. And it means our past is full of meaning and direction; it’s not just a random series of events.

But another part of the thrill we get from noticing Jesus at work in our past, is that that means right here, right now, he is working in ways we probably don’t notice. It should be our goal, as disciples of the risen Lord, not just to have Jesus appear to us after the fact, but to train ourselves, through prayer and attention, to notice those moments in the present, so that Jesus might be brought to life in a much more immediate way. We should aspire to be, like Holmes and Poirot, detectives of the spiritual sort, taking a look at the world and seeing what no one else can see, seeing how it all fits together, and what is really important. “Open the eyes of our faith,” we pray in today’s collect, “that we may behold him in all his redeeming work.” What a gift that would be. How exciting would it be to walk through this world expecting to encounter the risen Christ? How invigorating to be present enough in each moment to see not only the superficial but the eternal bubbling up in every interaction or encounter. How would that change how we approached each day?

Jesus in our past, Jesus in our present. And what of our future? How does what we learn from looking back, or looking around help give us clearer vision of what we are looking forward to? “Beloved, we are God’s children *now*,” the author of 1 John writes, and, “what we will be has not yet been revealed.” We can’t say for sure what lies ahead; the future is cloudy. But “we do know this: we will be like him.” The point of noticing Jesus in the past, and training ourselves to see him in the present is that through such deeper awareness we are changed every day, more and more into his likeness; his gracious, courageous, patient, faithful, loving likeness. The more we notice Jesus, the more the distance between us and him evaporates and the more and more we become like him.

Recognize Jesus in the past, look for Jesus in the present so we may be more like Jesus in the future. That’s what we’re here for. {As we are going to sing in just a few minutes, “Praise to the living God! All praised be his Name, who was, and is, and is to be, for ay the same.” It is not just poetry it’s a promise; a trinity of presence that reminds us Jesus was, is and always will be with us.} And if we can be aware of the way he surrounds us on all sides with his loving care, then our lives, our souls, our hearts will be made more and more like his from soaking up the atmosphere of his proximity. To notice the risen Lord in our midst means we might become one with him, and live our lives more fully as he did. This is our deepest calling. “Through Christ and with Christ and in Christ,” this is the pinnacle of our prayer. To be like him. That’s what we’re all about. You might even say, it’s “elementary.”