

Oh Say, Can You See? Luke 24:36-49
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Do you ever have trouble seeing beyond the tip of your nose? I do. I often take a walk in the church neighborhood at lunchtime. It wakes me up. It's better than coffee. It gets the blood moving. It blows fresh air through my brain. But just now, as the sun gets stronger, I have to wear a broad-brimmed hat. It sits rather low over my face, so I can literally see no further than the tip of my nose.

Sometimes I get distracted by my own thoughts and forget to look where I'm going. All of the sudden I'll stop, realizing I'm no longer on my route. (I've explored a lot around the church neighborhood this way!) Then I have to lift up my head, look around, take stock. If you don't want to get lost, you have to look beyond the tip of your nose; you have to have *vision*. My friends, the bottom of the ladder is crowded with those who see no further than the tip of their nose. On the other hand, those who have vision can see the invisible, hear the inaudible, believe the incredible, and think the unthinkable. That's what's going on in our Gospel text today.

There are two things I want to do this morning. First, to consider what it means to see Jesus, to see LIFE. Second, to consider what it means to be his witness. What does that look like?

So first, think back to our Gospel lesson. Remember that the Resurrection was a sea-change for the disciples. This is now the third Sunday that we are experiencing what it meant to them to see Jesus, alive and well – and to overcome their doubts and fear. They literally could not believe it, first out of fear, and finally out of joy.

So it's still the day of the Resurrection. Earlier that morning, women had visited the tomb and found it empty. Peter and John checked it out; no one there. Soon rumors began to fly: Jesus was alive! Mary saw him. Simon saw him. Two men from Emmaus saw him. Could it be true? That's where we come into the story today.

The disciples are not taking chances. They are hiding behind a locked door. If enemies had come for Jesus, they might come again for his followers. The disciples are afraid and confused.

But now, all of the sudden, Jesus is there! Never mind the locked door. Never mind their hiding place. Jesus appears before them, saying, "Peace be with you." How can it be? Is this a ghost? A figment of their imagination? A trick played on their minds by grief?

Jesus has to prove it to them. He shows them the nail prints in his hands and feet. Now, no other living person has marks like that. But still, they are confused and afraid. Could this be a ghost? So Jesus eats some food in their presence. Finally, they believe. He is truly there with them, in the flesh. (Not a disembodied spirit.) Jesus is alive!

What did the disciples see that day? They saw Jesus. And in doing so, they saw more than a living, breathing person; they were seeing Life itself (Life with a capital "L"). It was a sea change for them.

The disciples learned something about vision that day. They learned to see life where they least expected it. Jesus did more than reveal himself to them; he opened their minds to understand Scripture and all it said about him. They also began to see themselves in a new light: not only as followers of Jesus, but as *witnesses* of all he had said and done. And now they had a new job: to go out and tell what they knew. Their eyes were opened; their vision widened.

Oh say, can *you* see? Life is sometimes hard to see. Let's be honest: we are surrounded by death. The news is full of fire, rape, murders, shootings and terrorism. *That's* what we see. More and more, if I hear shots in the neighborhood, I'm wondering about guns as well as fireworks. You know? These days, we are more likely to see danger. This consciousness of death clouds our vision; it makes it hard to see Life. We expect to see Death. The disciples (like all of us) understood that physical death is just that. People don't generally climb out of a casket or a grave – resurrected Life is not what we expect to see.

Life is sometimes hard to see. It is often clouded by your own misunderstandings. The disciples did not expect God to come to them in human form, and yet -- there was Jesus, standing right there before them, risen from the dead. They hadn't understood the Scriptures. So Jesus had to open their minds. He had to reveal to them the Scriptures so that they would see the evidence. Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection were foretold. It had been there all along. But they just hadn't seen it. A lot of the Bible was for them (as well as for many of us), scattered bits and pieces that didn't always come together to make a complete picture.

Take a look again at your bulletin cover. Sometimes, the Bible can seem like those random pieces at the top of the image. They mean nothing in that scattered form. But when you put them together and read the white spaces in between, what you couldn't see before is (all of the sudden) plain as day. Now, when you see that lower image, you can't NOT see the word, "Jesus." Reading Scripture can be like that. What didn't make sense before, makes all the sense in the world when Jesus becomes the focal point. And the Holy Spirit is the one who opens your eyes to see; he opens your minds to understand.



Oh say, can you see? Jesus *is* risen; he *is* alive; he is here today. We can't see and touch him as the disciples could. But we do have his Word and the Sacrament, which bring his real presence into our midst. We have his promise: *Where 2 or 3 are gathered, there am I in the midst.* Where Jesus is, there is Life. Lift up your eyes to see Life!

That's the first thing we see in our lesson today. Open your eyes to see Jesus, to see Life. Let your mind be opened (as the Holy Spirit works in you) to understand God's Word. But before we move on, there is a challenge. We do live in a world that calls to us with many voices, many messages. In order to sort out the voice of God, you need to be in a place where you are hearing his Word. That's why church is important (one big reason). It's not a matter of fulfilling a religious duty, but rather an opportunity to learn to recognize the sound of his voice. To sort out all those messages and find the one that will give you life. We've said it before, we'll say it again: you need to be studying God's Word, on your own and in community. It needs to be a priority in your life because God is talking to you. The question is, whether your mind is open to it; so you can recognize his voice and his message, and live by it. You can't see until you lift up your head and look. That's when your vision will be broadened and you will find your way home. The Holy Spirit is your teacher; open your minds to receive his teaching.

OK, moving on; here's the second thing: Jesus said, "You are witnesses of these things." As followers of Jesus; as people who believe in him and want to do as he did; as people of the Word, who hear his voice and know his message, we too are witnesses. And witnesses have a job to do.

Now, the word, "witness" carries some baggage for some Christians. They may think of street evangelists, people who can be rather obnoxious, who push their beliefs on others. That is *not* what a witness does. Think courtroom. Think judge and jury. A witness is neither of these. A witness is called to the stand, not to prove or to persuade, but simply to tell what he knows. If he has heard or seen something, he tells it in his own words. And when he's told it, he's done his job. But the results are up to the judge and jury.

Our youngest daughter, Sharon, once asked me about her friend, Rajah. Sharon was in first or second grade, about 6 years old. Her friend Rajah was the daughter of the Palestinian ambassador to Tanzania, at a time when you couldn't say "Palestinian" without also saying "terrorist." And Rajah's family was Muslim. So one day out of the blue, Sharon asked, "Mom, is Rajah going to hell?" Well, what do you say to a little girl? So I thought about it and finally said, "I don't know. Only God knows. He is the judge; he's the one who makes that call. You and I are *not* the judge. We don't know what God knows, what God sees. And that's a good thing – so we don't have to go around deciding who's going to heaven or hell." We both thought about that for a minute.

And I realized there was more to say. So I added, "But that doesn't mean we can't do anything. You and I still have a job. We have to tell what we know. We know about Jesus and his love; we know about forgiveness and heaven. This is good news! So we need to tell Rajah what we know." That seemed to satisfy her. My friends, that's what a witness does.

It's like the watchman on the wall. The prophet Ezekiel said that the job of the watchman who walked the wall surrounding Jerusalem, was to alert the people inside of danger coming from the outside. If he sees an enemy army advancing, he has to tell people. If he doesn't tell, and the army comes and people are killed, then their blood is on his head. But if he does warn them and they refuse to believe him, and people get killed, then the blood is on their own heads. Like the

watchman, we have a job: to tell what we see, to share what we know. About Jesus and his love; about forgiveness and heaven. Our job is not to harangue, not to pressure; simply to tell. And the results are in God's hands (not yours).

Some of you are attending the Sunday morning class called "Vanishing Grace." There's some great material here that helps us, as Christians, move away from being religion-dispensers to become grace-dispensers. People are tired of religion. And yet they are thirsty for spiritual meaning in their lives. What are the signs? Promiscuity, addiction, self-destructive behavior – these are signs of people thirsty for love. Strident skeptics who mock the faith, and drifters out of church into other forms of spirituality are thirsty for meaning and truth. Pleasure-seekers will not find what they want in its more superficial forms; they thirst for the lasting joy of God. An agnostic was heard saying, "If there is no God, never was a God, why do we miss him so much?" St Augustine said, "We were made for you, O Lord; and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You."

If people shy away from religion, how can we reach them for Christ? By listening for signs of thirst. As a witness, your first step is to listen to your friends, neighbors, co-workers. Make friends – not in order to put another notch on your belt in the hope of gaining a convert, but out of a sincere desire to get to know them. And when you can, address the source of their unquenched thirst. Become a grace dispenser, in every sense of the word. Yancey says, "As one who has drunk deeply of that grace, I want to offer it to a world adrift." It's a natural part of love.

God has lavished his love on us. We heard it in our second lesson today. Think of it! "Lavish" is a powerful word. It means "to pour out extravagantly." God is not stingy with his love. He pours it out without measure. There is no drought in God's love; the tap is wide open. And as our cups fill up, they naturally overflow to fill the cup of another. That's what a witness does. He loves, with God's extravagant love.

Oh say, can you see? Life is right in front of you: Jesus himself; he is alive. That's the witness of Easter. It's the witness of all of Scripture. It's your witness too. This world is thirsting for peace, forgiveness, faith, love. Are you willing to tell your friends and neighbors that Jesus lives – and why that's important? This new life changes you. Are you willing to let the Holy Spirit work through you to make this change possible for others, too?

My friends, Jesus assures us: there is nothing to fear. He says, "Peace be with you." Don't be afraid to see Life, my friends. Jesus is alive. The Bible is true. And you are his witnesses. It's life-changing. It's life-giving. Amen