

A Sermon for Easter 3, Year B
Luke 24: 36b–48
Fr. Jim Cook

The Surprising, and Disappointing, Jesus.

While the disciples [who had returned from Emmaus] were telling how they had seen Jesus risen from the dead, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost.

God, it seems, is always more than willing to surprise and delight us; and even, sometimes, to shock us and disappoint us.

Take the disciples, for example. At the very beginning of his ministry, they saw the miracles Jesus was performing, and heard his teachings, and saw how he was attracting so many people. They thought he looked like a sure winner, and so they joined themselves to his cause, hoping one day to be able to sit in glory with Jesus, when he came into his earthly kingdom. What they didn’t expect, however, was for this winner to apparently “lose” so badly in the end.

And three years later, when Jesus was making his triumphal entry into Jerusalem (which we observed on Palm Sunday), none of the disciples could anticipate the way things ended on Good Friday. And while they were trying to come to grips with his death, several of the women came and told them that they’d seen Jesus, and he was alive. And not long after that, two of the disciples returned from Emmaus and told the others how Jesus walked with them. And while they were trying to make some sense of that, and put it all into perspective, Jesus himself suddenly appears in their midst. First, he was dead; and now he’s not.

A couple of months later, while the religious and civil leaders are finally comfortable in the knowledge that they had finally rid themselves of that nuisance of a carpenter from Galilee, suddenly Peter starts preaching in their Temple, telling people that Jesus is alive again, and that *he’s* the Messiah for whom they’ve been longing.

And it just goes on. We think we know what’s going on, we think we know everything that we need to know, and God somehow manages to upset the applecart, and undo everything we’ve managed to accomplish.

Like, fifteen hundred years later, when the first version of the King James Bible (1611) was finally put to press, I’m sure that the translators and publishers, and even the readers and scholars, thought they were holding in their hands the definitive piece of biblical scholarship. But then, after some time passes by, someone unearthed older manuscripts that revealed numerous errors in the beloved King James Bible.

All of which just goes to show, that whenever we think we have God nailed down, and figured out, he somehow manages to wriggle free and amaze and surprise us, and even disappoint us, yet again.

Half a century ago, when the Episcopal Church was, I'm sure, feeling confident in the knowledge that its ministries and liturgies were correctly ordered – with only males serving at the altar, and the 1928 Book of Common Prayer firmly established in every parish – all of a sudden women and girls wanted access to the very same ministries as the men, and someone had the gall to suggest that our Prayer Book needed updating. And yet, amid all of the hullabaloo created by these “innovation,” and to quote the Apostle James in the book of Acts, it still seemed “good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28) to attend to those concerns.

From day to day, and from year to year, we seem to move *from* being certain of what we believe, *to* not being quite so certain. There was a time when I was convinced that, if I had lived in Galilee two thousand years ago, I would have been a follower of Jesus. And, if I had been in Jerusalem during Holy Week, I would have been among the crowd cheering Jesus' arrival, but not in the crowd calling for his death. Nowadays, I'm not so sure.

And just like the disciples, we are startled, and often terrified, at the various ways the Risen Lord comes into our lives – individually *and* corporately – and manages to shake things up. It seems that God doesn't like us to be complacent, and in fact, he may even enjoy failing to meet our expectations. At least, that's how it seems sometimes.

For example, Christians used to think that God inhabited only his church – us! – until (in 1054) the one church split into two, and we had to start thinking about the possibility that God might actually inhabit not only our church, but *theirs as well*. And it didn't end there, for the one church that had been split into two, continued to divide itself until, now, there are literally hundreds, if not thousands, of individual denominations ... each apparently filled with the Spirit of God. Will it never end? Apparently not, for, in these the last several decades, we've also been struggling with the notion that God may even be inhabiting the Muslim community as well. God forbid!

And then, since the last General Convention, in 2003, we've been confronted with the notion that God may very well see a place among his ordained ministers for men and women who are living in life-long, committed homosexual relationships. What next, Lord? Although it's difficult to predict what will transpire at our next General Convention, which meets in about six weeks, I'm sure God will figure out a way to surprise and disappoint us yet again.

Which leads me to my main point: From the beginning of time, we have been engaged in a wrestling match with God – actually, God's been wooing us, while we've been wrestling with him – trying to force him to finally saying “Uncle” and conform to *our* world view. And only rarely, and reluctantly I might add, do we ever surrender any ground to him.

The more things change, the more they seem to remain the same. Almost. For the Easter Season is one that reminds us that things aren't always the way they seem to be. Sometimes they are dramatically different from the way we'd like them to be. God has always had a hard time meeting our expectations.

But I'm reminded of the prayer we recite each year on Good Friday (*italics mine*):

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light ... let the whole world see and know that things which *were* cast down are being raised up, and things which *had* grown old are being made new, and that *all* things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made ...”

The Resurrection of Jesus was the most unexpected, and surprising, and amazing, and, to some, disappointing, act of God. And it wasn't just *Jesus* that God raised and transformed, but also *our* perceptions and world views. And if we ever hope to keep up with God, we need to be able to loosen our grip on some of the things we hold near and dear to our religiously-minded hearts – ways of doing things, and ways of understanding how God works in the world – and start again, and this time *following* God, rather than trying to *lead* God.

As Joyce Rupp, a Catholic writer and teacher, and spiritual director, aptly put it:

And every year
the dull and dead in us
meets our Easter challenge:
to be open to the unexpected,
to believe beyond our security,
to welcome God in every form,
and trust in our own greening.

God wants to open our minds to see new possibilities *in* our lives, and *for* our lives. And today, as he did two thousand years ago, Jesus stands in the midst of his followers, saying the very same words:

Peace be with you.
Why are you frightened?
Why do doubts arise in your hearts?
Do you not see that I am with you still?

The Season of Easter calls us to look for Jesus in all areas of our life – but especially in those areas where we are least comfortable venturing – and to be willing to be surprised and delighted, but also willing to be amazed and disappointed, to see where the Risen Christ has gone, and follow where he calls us to go.