

The Unexpected Christ
A Sermon by the Rev. Patti Davis
Galilee Episcopal Church

Luke 24:13-35
Year A, Easter 3
April 6, 2008

He showed up one Sunday morning, sat up front in the very first pew and stayed after for coffee hour, a tall, very thin, disheveled man with whiskered face and eyes that gleamed just a little too brightly. Probably just a handout away from homelessness at any given time, he adopted us as his church and his family, this man who was clearly damaged by life. To their credit, the congregation welcomed him as they would anyone else, welcomed him and fed and clothed him with no thought of praise, though his praise was over the top. All of him was over the top. He was enthusiastic about everything but especially about the church and the people in it. The problems began when he started showing up for our theology discussion group. We called it "Drop-in Theology" and it was a group that sat around the fireplace and invited the questions that never got asked, the wonderings that had no resolution except in wondering out loud with other folks who were wondering too. Jerry, we'll call him, started showing up at Drop-in Theology and kept coming back, though the conversations wandered far afield and he seemed to have trouble keeping up. But that didn't stop him from adding to the discussion. The only problem was, once he started talking he couldn't stop. Jerry could go on and on, indefinitely it seemed, until cut off, as gracefully as we could, a momentary pause until he had another idea he just had to share. It tried the patience of the group and challenged the leadership, how to control this man who was clearly out of control. And then, in the middle of an otherwise sane discussion, one of our members asked, "What if Jerry is really Jesus Christ, sitting right here with us?"

We were all silenced by the question because of course, we all had our ideas of what Jesus would be like if he came among us, and Jerry wasn't it. And perhaps that's what we have in common with these followers of Jesus, on the road to Emmaus. Because they'd seen him crucified and clearly the Messiah wasn't to be found at Calvary, so why should they expect to see him anywhere else? The commentaries suggest that their senses were supernaturally dulled, that they were somehow prevented from recognizing him. But I'm more inclined to think it's like that experience we've all had of seeing someone who seems familiar but in an unfamiliar place. Since it couldn't be someone we know, for us it isn't. Then too, grief has its own brand of blindness, as do exhaustion and fear. We are seeing but we don't see. Like those two men on the road, in all sorts of ways we travel in daylight but move in shadow, people and things seldom as clear as we need them to be.

And so we interpret what we see on the basis of what we think we know, never guessing that God may just show up in a completely new way, a dead savior restored to life or a troubled and troubling man who makes himself at home in the front pew. Because we're certain God wouldn't appear in such a guise, we fail to recognize God coming alongside us, intruding on our well-organized, well-planned lives. Because it doesn't fit our understanding of the world as we've constructed it, we would confine God to the places and activities and people we think suitable, placing limits on the illimitable God. So though our hearts may burn within us, we write it off to heartburn!

It's not that unusual. The Bible gives us a long history of God's appearing and not being recognized, from appearing to Moses in a burning bush to being disguised as 3 travelers meeting Abraham at Mamre. So perhaps God disguises himself to make it easier for us. To see God as God is, to see the resurrected Jesus would be too much for us. So God chooses to be present to us in some most unlikely people, bearing most unlikely messages --- all to open us to the idea of a god bigger than our own limited imaginations. Because God, if honestly met, tends to make people uncomfortable. Just think of the woman at the well confronted by her marital history, or Peter denying Christ or Saul, blinded on the road to Damascus. Meeting God can be profoundly disconcerting because it will change us -- our values, our ideas, our sense of ourselves and the people around us. It will change the way we see. And when that happens, we want to return to our own safe places, wherever our own Emmaus is, never guessing that God might show up there too. Because God aims to grow us into expansive people, people with room enough in our lives and in our churches for all who would come within reach of his saving embrace. If God appeared in Jesus some 2000 years ago in ways that were turn-the-tables-upside-down unsettling, why should we assume it would be any different now?

But it is so hard for us to see. Helen Keller once said, "I have often thought it would be a blessing if each human being were stricken blind or deaf at some time during his early adult life. Darkness would make him more appreciative of sight; silence would teach him the joy of sound. Now and then I have tested my seeing friends to discover what they see. Recently I was visited by a very good friend who had just returned from a long walk in the woods, and I asked her what she had observed. 'Nothing in particular,' she replied. I might have been incredulous had I not been accustomed to such responses, for long ago I became convinced that the seeing see little."¹

So just as the Messiah was not the person these followers expected to see, so too God insists on the unexpected in our lives. It is the way that God demonstrates over and over again, "See, I am doing a new thing; the old has passed away." And so God has called each of us here -- so that we might be partners with him in doing a new thing here in this church. But if we would walk with God, we must get comfortable with being uncomfortable. We can be sure that what we see will not be what we expect but if our vision is God's vision, it will be a wonder.

The Hebrew tradition of hospitality for the stranger is based on the deeply held belief that in welcoming the stranger, we may be welcoming the Messiah. We, cousins of the Hebrews and disciples of the risen Lord, must remember that He still lives and moves among us in bodies much like ours. He comes, in the people we would least expect, sometimes saying the things we do not want to hear and cannot understand. He comes bearing the good news to people long blinded by our own biases and preoccupations. He comes, when we had almost given up hope, and offers to *lift up the cup of salvation*,² to enable *the slow of heart to believe*.³ The trick is to always assume that God will reveal himself in another person but never to presume to know what that revelation will look like.

¹ Helen Keller, "Three Days to See" (1993)

² Psalm 116:11

³ Luke 24