

NOW YOU SEE HIM

Carl Wilton

Lamington Presbyterian Church

April 1, 2018; Easter Day, Year B

Isaiah 25:6-9; Mark 16:1-8

***“You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified.
He has been raised; he is not here.”***

Mark 16:6b

It hasn't happened, I've been told, since 1956 — a few months before I was born. A collision of holidays like unto a collision of planets: Easter on April Fools Day.

The two seem so incompatible: this Christian holiday of such solemnity and importance, and the day of practical jokes. It's like a lovely Easter lily equipped with a rubber bulb that, when you squeeze it, squirts water in somebody's face. What has Easter to do with April Fools Day?

Well, as it turns out, a lot. *Good Friday* happening on April Fools Day would be another matter, but Easter's the celebration of resurrection, of unexpected and overflowing joy, of everything in life that's dark and foreboding being overturned by that joyous proclamation: “The Lord is risen!”

To the disciples, it didn't seem that way at the time, but it didn't take long, surely, for a great big belly-laugh to come upon them, whenever they recalled the events they'd recently witnessed. Mary Magdalene was so glum and forlorn that sad morning when she visited his tomb, and when she saw him, she didn't even

recognize him. She thought he was the gardener. *The gardener* — can you imagine?

Then there was that time a bunch of them were gathered in that dark little room, with the windows shuttered and the doors locked, and he just showed up there amongst them. He didn't even knock. And what was the first thing he said to them, having come back from the grave? "*Shalom*" — the everyday greeting, the equivalent of "Hey, what's up?"

Then there was that time he played several of them for fools. They were out fishing, having a lousy night, when they heard a guy on the beach shouting at them. He said "Try throwing your net on the other side of the boat!"

Come on — the other side of the boat? What sort of crazy advice is that? But they did, and the net was full to bursting. Peter figured out right away who it was. He was so eager to see Jesus, he dove into the water and swam for shore. When he stepped out onto that beach, dripping wet, what was it Jesus had on the barbecue grill? *Fish!*

There's a lot of humor in these resurrection stories, but we often miss it, on account of the many layers of sanctimonious veneer painted over them. The resurrection of Jesus was completely unexpected. It took them all by surprise. The risen Lord would show up someplace, abruptly vanish, then show up someplace

completely different. It was like a giant game of peekaboo, that laugh-filled game beloved of small children. *Now you see him, now you don't!*

It's not the sort of story anyone would be compelled to make up. We have four Gospels that tell of Jesus' resurrection, plus several of Paul's letters that mention it, but none of them are coordinated in their details. Events were simply moving too fast for anyone to put together a coherent account, according to the standards of journalism — then or now.

In fact, if you set out to make up a story about God showing up on earth, I don't think you'd follow the example of any of those biblical Easter stories.

You wouldn't want any of those brief, tantalizing, here-today-gone-today appearances. No, you'd want to start with absolute certainty. If you set your story in the present day, you'd want God turning up in some unmistakably public place — let's say, giving a speech at the United Nations. The 24-hour news networks would pick it up right away. God's speech would be bounced off dozens of satellites, so people the world over could view it, in real time.

You'd want to roll out some big-time miracles, too. God showed Moses how to part the Red Sea. You'd at least want a dry footpath between New York and London this time around. Water from a rock? How about a geyser bursting out of

the Grand Canyon, to solve that perennial drought in the Southwest? The U.S. Navy has its Blue Angels precision flying team. You'd want some real angels to show up, trailing stardust in their wake, as they fly circles around the fighter jets.

As for special effects, you'd spare no expense. (After all, if God's behind it, money is no object, right?) The general public is pretty jaded about movie special effects by now, having seen everything the CGI artists can offer. They've watched Harry Potter zooming around on his broomstick playing Quidditch, and giant alien spaceships blowing up the White House. You'd need something really splashy, to bend back the limits of natural law as far as it can go — and, of course, also unmistakably real. God's visit to earth would demand nothing less.

If that's so, isn't it a wonder how poorly put-together are the Gospel accounts of Jesus' resurrection?

The most unsatisfying resurrection account of all is the passage from the Gospel of Mark we read today. The women bring their burial-spices to the tomb, wondering who they'll find to roll the stone away, but they discover that's already been taken care of. Leaning down and peering into the tomb, they see some young guy all dressed in white. He looks up and calmly says, "Sorry. The guy you're looking for has been raised from the dead. I don't know where he is, exactly, but

I'm pretty sure if you go to Galilee, you'll find him walking around there someplace."

Then Mark ends it by saying, "They went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

Nothing to anyone — really? The stone's mysteriously rolled away, the body's nowhere to be found, a decidedly angelic-looking character tells you in a general way where Jesus might be — and there Mark's story ends. Oh, there are a few more incidents tacked on to the end — vague allusions to post-resurrection appearances — but the language doesn't sound at all like the rest of Mark's Gospel, some early manuscripts don't contain those verses at all, and the Bible scholars are nearly 100% certain they were tacked on by some scribe, who just couldn't stand the idea that Mark's story ends so abruptly and so unspectacularly.

But yet, in a strange way, that makes the underlying truth to which Mark and the others bear witness all the more credible. Their stories are not carefully crafted. They're filled with inconsistencies, even contradictions. They don't portray the first tellers of the tale — the ones who first told it to the Gospel-writers — in a good light at all. In short, these stories don't sound like they were made up.

I read something the other day written by Charles Colson, the convicted

Watergate conspirator. He later went on to become a Christian evangelist.

“I know the resurrection is a fact,” Colson said, “and Watergate proved it to me. How? Because 12 men testified they had seen Jesus raised from the dead, then they proclaimed that truth for 40 years, never once denying it. Every one was beaten, tortured, stoned and put in prison. They would not have endured that if it weren’t true. Watergate embroiled 12 of the most powerful men in the world — and they couldn't keep a lie for three weeks. You're telling me 12 apostles could keep a lie for 40 years? Absolutely impossible.”

In the world of art, you know one of the surest ways to tell a forged painting from the genuine article? The greatest art appraisers all know this. They look for the mistakes, because an original work of art is likely to display a few errors. Here and there is a place where the paint has smeared a little, where the perspective is a little off, or where the white pigment has yellowed with age. Today they can put a painting in an x-ray machine, and see, under the topmost layers of paint, some place where Caravaggio or Rembrandt painted in a figure of some person, didn’t like it, and painted it over again. Most modern forgers won’t include imperfections like that. Their forgery comes out, in the end, looking just a little too perfect.

Well, I’m pleased to tell you the Gospels of the New Testament have no such problem. As Frederick Buechner puts it, they tell of the resurrection...

“...not in a blaze of glory, but more like a candle flame in the dark, flickering first in this place, then in that place, then in no place at all. If they had been making the whole thing up for the purpose of converting the world, presumably they would have described it more the way the book of Revelation describes how he will come back again at the end of time with ‘the armies of heaven arrayed in fine linen, white and pure’ and his eyes ‘like a flame of fire, and on his head many diadems’ (19:14, 12). But that is not the way the Gospels tell it. They are not trying to describe it as convincingly as they can. They are trying to describe it as truthfully as they can.” [Secrets in the Dark (Zondervan, 2007).]

It is, honestly, not so much a matter of “Here he is, the risen Lord!” but, rather, “Now you see him, now you don’t.”

Yet, isn’t that more true-to-life? Doesn’t that more accurately mirror how we experience the presence of Christ in our lives, day-to-day?

None of us who’ve sensed his presence would describe the experience as a blaze of celestial glory. Our glimpses of the risen Lord are more like an image we catch in our peripheral vision. Often we’re left, after such an experience, with more questions than answers. Yet, even so, we feel we’ve been changed. We *know* we’ve been changed.

The last word of the angel to the women disciples, in Mark's Gospel, is "go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." It's appropriate that this Gospel ends with a command to get up and start moving.

Notice the angel's telling the disciples to get up and live as a resurrection people *before* any of them have seen the risen Jesus. Isn't that so much like our situation? We've all heard the testimony about resurrection: as mysterious and baffling and confusing as those early stories are. It defies rational explanation. It's more about the truth we perceive in our hearts than the sort of conclusion we deduce from cold, calculating reason.

But still, the angel's invitation — issued to us even *before* we have everything figured out — is to cease our sitting around and waiting for faith to come to us, but instead to get up and start walking. Take the road of discipleship, the angel's saying to all who yearn to see Jesus. Get up and get onto the road: because that's the place where good things, beautiful things, happen.

It certainly was that way for two disciples of Jesus who, according to Luke, were walking to the village of Emmaus one day. A man overtakes them on the road, but "their eyes were kept from recognizing him."

It's only when they arrive at their destination, sit down at table with their

mysterious traveling companion, and see him break the bread that “their eyes are opened and they recognize him.” A blink of an eye later, he “vanishes out of their sight.” Now you see him, now you don’t.

Friends, here at the Lord’s table is one place where — more than most places — you and I just may glimpse the risen Lord. Maybe we’ll sense his presence in the ancient words of the communion liturgy. Maybe he’ll come to us along with the scent of the yeasty bread, or the sweet taste of the unfermented wine. Maybe in the crowd of fellow-seekers sitting all around us, we’ll sense a little hint of the communion of saints, that vast company of witnesses who have lived their lives on this earth, and have been conveyed by the power of the resurrection into life eternal.

Then again, maybe nothing will happen. Maybe the bread will be just ordinary bread, and the drink ordinary grape juice. Maybe, as a spiritual experience, this sacrament will prove to be as empty as... an empty tomb.

Should that be the case for you this day, not to worry. It happens to all of us. My only suggestion, in that case, is to come back another day and try again. The angel’s sage advice to those bewildered disciples is to take to the road, to begin walking — and you know that, when you walk anywhere, the journey is never completed with a single step. It’s the rhythm of the journey, the cadence — the

placing of one foot after the other that is regular worship — that puts us in the place where, at last, he *will* overtake us. Then, as it was for those disciples on the Emmaus Road, our hearts *will* “burn within us, ” and we will say to ourselves at last: “Now, we see him!”

Good journeying to you, as you follow after the risen Lord!

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