

“The Great Adventure”
(John 20:1-18)

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I’m going to retitl this morning’s sermon, “The Great Adventure.” The story on Easter Sunday begins at the entrance to the tomb where Jesus was left for dead, after his crucifixion. It is a strange story, not only because death is surprisingly cheated, but by the way it starts a great adventure that continues to this day.

Where’s Waldo?

And what is the great adventure that Jesus’s resurrection appearance reveals to us? I’d like to try to answer this question by considering the adventure that parents and children go on when they pick up any of the children’s picture books written by Martin Handford, called the “Where’s Waldo” books.

Waldo is a tall, thin young man, a cartoon figure, who wears a cap with a ball on the top and round glasses. And the task is to find him hidden in drawings of crowds of people who are all in some place, doing the things that people do in those places, like at the beach or the park or at a Museum.

It is great fun to sit with a grandchild or if you are very young, with an older person and wonder together about what the different people in the crowd are up to and what is going on around them. While at the same time, you make your way through the crowd looking for Waldo. And then when you find him, there is a happy flash of recognition. You see the cap, the glasses, the scarf, and you know it's him. You give each other a high five, because you have achieved your goal.

But that is only the beginning. When you turn to the next page, you find a new crowd and a new setting and you can begin all over again, always looking forward to that "aha moment" when Waldo will suddenly appear.

It's all very satisfying, because it appeals to the natural desire within us to identify something familiar. The happiness in that moment of recognition reminds us of the relief we experienced as little children, when we lost our mothers in the supermarket and then found her in the next aisle or the happiness of spotting a friend you haven't seen in years coming out of the baggage claim at the airport.

Mary Recognizes Jesus

To me this is a helpful way to think about what happens at the entrance to the empty tomb. What begins is a sort of “Where’s Waldo?” adventure.

I say this because one of the surprising things is that Mary doesn’t recognize Jesus. She is perplexed and distressed by the fact that he is not at the tomb, and she assumes that his body has been taken away. And even when he is standing right next to her and asking her what she is looking for, she doesn’t recognize him.

This rather strange fact is a key to the adventure that begins for us with Easter. But instead of turning the pages of a book in search of Waldo, as an after Easter people, we get up each morning asking ourselves, “Where will I find Jesus today?” And as we move through the situations and amongst the people who make up our day, we look forward to that moment of recognition. How will we connect with the one who brings the “living water” that will refresh and renews our world?

Beyond Normal Eyesight

But then the question that arises is: “How will we be able to recognize him in our lives today, when unlike Mary, we never even knew what he looked like in the first place?”

What happens to Mary next answers that question, but in a mysterious way. Jesus calls her by name. And it is only then that she recognizes him. In other words, his identity is revealed, not by normal eyesight, but by something in the way he speaks to her.

Up until his crucifixion, Jesus was visibly to those who knew him in a very straight forward. They knew what he looked like, they knew how he behaved. He would not have been any harder for them to find, than it would be for us to find Waldo in a “Where’s Waldo” picture book.

But at the entrance to the tomb, the task of finding him suddenly grows more mysterious, because unlike Waldo, who can be identified by clothes and his physical appearance, Mary’s encounter with Jesus reveals to us that he can no longer be identified by the brown hair, olive skin, medium height and facial features that most likely marked his historical existence.

After his resurrection, regular vision was no longer enough to identify him. Now it was only possible to identify Jesus by recognizing him through his behavior and the quality of his words or later, by the wounds on his body. It was no longer primarily the eyes, but the heart and its intuitions that had to be relied on to recognize him.

This separating of Jesus from any description that we today could use to identify someone is actually a theme that runs through the whole Gospel story and the fact that he wasn't recognized by the people closest to him after his resurrection... these things taken together give Jesus an "every person" quality, that makes it possible for us to think of him as being present in the world in the form of any given person, even in the likeness of you or me. And that is intentional.

Pentecost

A few weeks from now, when we arrive at Pentecost, we will discover that, not only is Jesus present with us after the resurrection in ways that are at first hidden from us, he will become present with us through his presence within others when God rains down the Holy Spirit on the gathering that day.

The story of Pentecost is a story meant to help us see that Christ is present and can find expression through each of us and those around us in the pews, for we understand ourselves to be a gathering that is continuous with that first Pentecost gathering, in what we call the "Body of Christ."

But that does not mean that we can think of ourselves as being the embodiment of Jesus all the time. We constantly lapse into sin in ways that separate us from his goodness. Of course we should treat each other as sacred all of the time, regardless.

An Uncontainable God

Maybe the best way of thinking about his presence with us originates with Jesus's own words, when he said to Nicodemus that "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." What he is saying in part is that, even though we have been entered by his Spirit, we cannot predetermine for ourselves who Jesus will choose to speak to us through.

We assume that Jesus is talking about the Spirit as it blows amongst us within the church, but we know both from the witness of the Bible itself and from our own experience that God is not captive to the expectations of any person, group or gathering. God can show up anywhere, at any time, in any given person or gathering. And it is for us to recognize him and witness to his love, when he does. And I think that this unpredictability is itself, part of what makes finding Christ in our daily lives such a great adventure.

The movements the Holy Spirit seems much more mysterious and hard to pin down than finding Waldo in a crowd. But it is also true that there are times when Christ comes to us in a way in which we really do know it is him. He ceases for a time to be like that wind that goes here and there in a way we can't quite put our finger on and suddenly he is with us in the form of a particular person or in a particular gathering, and with a specific message. And we know it is him because he sees us in our confusion, he knows us inside out and he loves us. In other words, he "calls us by name." And that is when we have our moment of recognition. That is when we say "Teacher, there you are, (point) I see that it is you. Now teach me." And when he teaches us we experience his words as the gushing forth of living water that quenches our thirsty hearts.

Reprise

And so we have this great adventure to look forward to. Every day is the turning of the page to a new setting, the supermarket, nursing home, warehouse, parking lot, school, the office - wherever we see things going on in the world around us, not only with our eyes, but more deeply with our hearts. In all of those places Jesus is swirling in the vicinity! Through whom or what situation will he suddenly appear

next? And how can we share this amazing adventure with others?
These are the questions I leave with you this Easter morning.