

“Seeing Jesus”
Jeremiah 31:31-34 & John 12:20-33

Sermon by Jan Edmiston
5th Sunday in Lent – April 2, 2006

The pulpit in the chapel at Columbia Theological Seminary has a small bronze plaque attached on top that only the preacher can see. It says: “We wish to see Jesus.” It’s a common quote to attach to a pulpit because – when the Word of God is preached – everyone longs to see Jesus, at least a glimpse. The quote comes from John’s gospel, read today.

Greek visitors to Jerusalem, in town for Passover - had heard about Jesus, and they approached Philip, one of his disciples¹ and said, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

We don’t know if they ever got to see him.

What happened next eventually became the conclusion of Jesus’ ministry. He tried – one last time – to explain *who* he was and *what it meant* to follow him.

The Greeks had approached Philip about an audience with Jesus. Philip went to Andrew. Andrew and Philip then went to Jesus. And instead of giving them a straight answer: “Yes, I’ll see them” or “No this is not a good time to see them,” Jesus launched into a sermon about a grain of wheat. It’s as if he was too distracted for a friendly visit. He was already preparing for what would happen next.

*Unless a grain of wheat falls in to the earth and dies,
it remains just a single grain. But if it dies, it bears much fruit.*

Jesus was that grain of wheat. Jesus had fallen to the earth. Jesus was about to die so that great fruit would blossom.

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Have you ever visited someone in the hospital or in a nursing home who was in the most desperate of situations? Maybe the person had no control over his or her life – hooked up to machines or unable to speak or hear or move?

Or have you ever found yourself sitting with a friend or acquaintance whose life has been completely shattered by a death or a betrayal or a legal nightmare? Have you ever been called on to be with someone going through such things?

Now here is the tougher question:

¹ See John 1:43-44 for the account of Jesus calling Philip.

Have you *ever* – upon leaving that hospital room or that nursing home, upon driving home after sitting with that friend – *breathed a sigh of relief that you could just go home?* It wasn't *you* in that hospital bed. It wasn't *you* whose whole life has been crushed.

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The *best* kind of nurses, the *best* kind of soldiers, the best kind of friends are the ones who don't merely stand at the sides of those in trouble. They get in there with them. Their friends' troubles become their own.

A good example is the team of four Westerners from the Christian Peacemaker Team who went into Iraq to support the civilians there several months ago. In the words of one of my colleagues "all four men entered the grave" with those people. Like Lazarus, three came out of the grave. Tom Fox from Virginia did not. "Yet the great mystery of the Christian faith is that even death cannot separate us from the Source of Life. Tom Fox lives now in the vast heart of God."²

My friend Katherine shares a story she recently heard from a former missionary named Tamara³ who served with her husband in South Africa shortly after the end of apartheid. Tamara was an oddity in their village because she was a successful white person who chose to live among poor black people *and* because she was a woman minister in a village where other women were considered the property of their husbands or their fathers.

One day, Tamara and her husband went to the funeral of a local man who had been a leader in their village church. The man's widow was also at the funeral, of course, but in the tradition of that village, she was completely covered in blankets from head to toe in spite of the heat of the day. In that culture, because *her husband* was dead, she was also considered dead. She was not to be seen.

The blankets covered her to symbolize that *she* did not exist any longer because *he* did not exist. It was as if she was *forced into the grave* with him.

She would have no property rights. She would inherit nothing to live on. She would mostly likely become the servant of her in-laws.

Tamara watched the woman move toward her husband's grave to drop a handful of dirt on the coffin. And then – still covered with heavy blankets – she inched back into her seat.

² From the blog of Katherine Pershey. See <http://www.kewp.blogspot.com/>

³ Tamara Nichols Rosenberg who is now an official with the Disciples of Christ denomination

It was at that moment when Tamara – not really thinking about the consequences, but overtaken by compassion – went over to the widow and climbed under the blankets with her. She moved so quickly, no one could stop her.

So there they were – Tamara and the widow – together under the blankets. The widow grabbed Tamara’s hand and squeezed so hard that she couldn’t feel her fingers.

At the end of the funeral, Tamara emerged from the blanket and standing there in front of her was the Bishop. *It occurred to her that this might be the end of her missionary career.* But instead, the Bishop said to her: “Thank you for entering the grave with that woman.”

She had not merely supported this woman in her sorrow and her nothingness; she had joined her. She had entered the grave with her.

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Friends, this is what *Jesus* did. Like a grain of wheat that falls into the earth, *Jesus was intentionally planted* into the throes of earthly life. And like that grain that dies so that new fruit might spring up, *Jesus* died so that *new life* would be possible.

And here is the astounding part: *Jesus* has entered our graves. God doesn’t just support us in our difficulties, in our miseries. He has looked down upon us from afar and said, “Peace be with you.”

He has come into the grave with us. *And he has promised to raise us out of our graves* as well.

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Brian Wren wrote about it this way, in the hymn that we just sang:

*And love that freely entered the pit of life’s despair
Can name our hidden darkness and suffer with us there.
LORD, if you now are risen, help all who long for light.
To hold the hand of promise till faith receives its sight.*

This is how the LORD helps those who long for light, whether we are talking about the people of Iraq or the women of rural African villages or a friend whose world has just been rocked:

In the likeness of Christ, we enter the grave with them,
whatever that grave looks like.

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We sometimes hear about changes in the church that we don't like, especially when compared to the glory years of the 1950s when church pews were full. *Those were also the days* when churches helped people in distant lands and in neighborhoods across town primarily by sending a check. We could remain distant from their peril. We didn't have to get our hands dirty.

Only professional ministers got personally involved. Only professional missionaries got personally involved.

Today, we increasingly understand Jesus' message better. The pews might not be as full, but our hands are dirtier. We directly serve food to the homeless. We teach the under-educated computer skills and we celebrate when they get jobs and promotions as if we are the ones finding success. Volunteers go to Haiti or to the Gulf States or into hospitals.

There are deacons and deacon helpers in this congregation who have taken on the trials of friends in need as if they were *their own* trials. This is what Jesus has taught us to do.

In fact . . . (and maybe this is why Jesus responded to a simple request from a couple of Greek admirers by talking about death and darkness) . . . *if we want to see Jesus*, we need to look for the fallen grains of wheat around us. We need to see those who are losing their lives in poverty or war or illness. *If we want to see Jesus*, all we have to do is look for those who are living in darkness. And then we need to go there.

Maybe what we need is a *new covenant*: a covenant of love and forgiveness. What we need is not just to know *about* God; we need to *know God so well* that we *allow ourselves to be overcome with compassion* and join those who sit in darkness, holding their hands and reassuring them that not even death can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

This is a crucial part of being a follower of Jesus.

If we want to call ourselves "Christian" then we must do what Christ did: follow him. Walk toward the light. Bring light to others.

If we want *to see Jesus*, we will be willing to do more than wave from a distance to those who need support, to those who need encouragement, to those who need help, saying "Don't worry. Peace be with you."

If we want *to see Jesus*, we must enter that grave with people in trouble. God provides through *us*.

In this story in John, the procession of palms has already taken place. But for us, the procession of palms is celebrated next Sunday. We are closing in on the end of Lent. And what have we learned? What has really changed about the way we live?

It's not about giving up coffee and chocolate. It's not about planning for spring break – although that can be a spiritual experience.

It's about following Jesus, doing what Jesus did, getting the dust of Jesus' feet on our own. Do we want to see Jesus or don't we?

In the groans of life, we look up and there he is.

Let us pray:

Holy God, you sent your Son to show us – in living flesh and bone – this new covenant of love and forgiveness. Help us to see. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.