

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Sunday, April 12, 2020
Easter

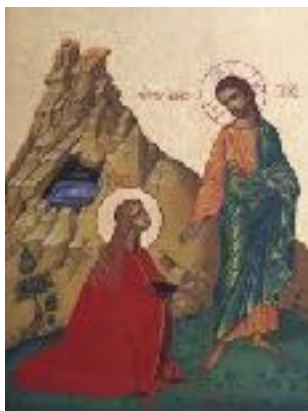
“Today’s Continuing Resurrection Surprises”

The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper

Christian Scripture: John 20:1-18



My daughter, Madeline, is named after her: ‘Mary Magdalene’.



In our gospel message from John, we heard this incredible story of Mary encountering Jesus just outside the empty tomb. What is incredible about this narrative is that Mary saw Jesus and did not recognize him. She thought he was the gardener! Now, to me this failure to recognize Jesus is almost as amazing as the resurrection of Jesus itself! How she did not recognize Jesus is really beyond me.

Whether Jesus was in a pristine state or whether he still displayed the marks of being battered and bruised from the crucifixion, she should have recognized him. The reason she should have recognised him has much to do with who she was.



An article in the *Smithsonian Magazine* summarizes best who Mary Magdalene was: “From the New Testament, one can conclude that Mary of Magdala (her hometown, a village on the shore of the Sea of Galilee) was a leading figure among those attracted to Jesus. When the men in that company abandoned him at the hour of mortal danger, Mary of Magdala was one of the women who stayed with him, even to the crucifixion. She was present at the tomb, the first person to whom Jesus appeared after his resurrection, and the first to preach the ‘Good News’ of that miracle. These are among the few specific assertions made about Mary Magdalene in the Gospels.



From other texts of the early Christian era, it seems that her status as an ‘apostle’, in the years after Jesus’ death, rivalled even that of Peter. This prominence derived from the intimacy of her relationship with Jesus, which, according to some accounts, had a physical aspect that included kissing”.¹

So, she, perhaps even more than the disciples, should have been the one most likely to recognize Jesus. Yet, initially, she didn’t. I have always wondered why. Perhaps I always will.



Lest we think that Mary Magdalene not recognizing Jesus was some sort of fluke, the same day two of the seventy disciples (Luke 10)

¹ James Carroll, “Who Was Mary Magdalene?”, *Smithsonian Magazine*, June 2006. Found at: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/who-was-mary-magdalene-119565482/>; accessed April 11, 2020.

walking to Emmaus also did not recognize Jesus (Luke 24:13-35). The scriptures state that “they were kept from recognizing him” (Luke 24:16) - whatever that means! Now the road to Emmaus is about seven miles, about an hour’s run for me - walking, I imagine, it would take about two hours. How does one not recognize Jesus for two hours?



In both our stories, it seems we cannot say that even Jesus’ voice triggered recognition. Because Mary heard Jesus and answered his question and did not recognize him. The disciples spoke with Jesus for miles and they did not recognize him. So, initially there was no visual or auditory recognition of Jesus. At this point, we can only speculate as to how or why this was. Perhaps the phrase “they were kept from recognizing him” offers us a clue and that clue is that it was something within Mary and the two disciples that blocked their recognition - and something that allowed it.

VIDEO

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sAqYmmYoDEk>



I was greatly moved by the testimony from the Archdiocese of Lima, Peru.²



The testimony from South America offered me, and I pray you as well, a new way to look at the Easter story and perhaps gave us an understanding as to why Mary and the two disciples did not initially recognize Jesus. As I heard it, the key sentence, the thesis, the fulcrum, the lynchpin, and the dénouement of the entire video was this: “But, now you will see Christ meeting you amid life ... hidden in a thousand faces”.

²A video message from the archdiocese of Lima, Peru, freely translated from Spanish by A.M. Pernia, SVD. Found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sAqYmmYoDEk>, accessed April 13, 2020. Uploaded by St. Anthony and St. Columba RC Churches, April 11, 2020.



Hospital workers. Doctors. Nurses. Janitors.



Truck drivers. Military. Police. Farmers. Fisherman. Priests.



Grocery store workers. Cashiers. Garbage workers.



“But, now you will see Christ meeting you amid life...hidden in a thousand faces...”.



Friends, if we have not yet been changed, dare I say, ‘born again’, in response to the teaching, the ministry, and the presence of Jesus Christ in our hearts, then we are going through life everyday failing to recognizing Jesus ‘meeting us amid life every day, hidden in a thousand faces’? Are we not recognizing Jesus, despite the fact that he is right there in front of us?



Is this such a radical question? I think not. Jesus said, ‘what you do to the least of these, you do unto me’ (Matthew 25:40)! The apostle Paul said that ‘you are the Body of Christ’ (I Corinthians 12:27)! Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane that you and I ‘would be one with

him' (John 17:21). So, is it so crazy to see Jesus in others who live-out the spirit of God?!



Friends in Christ, during this particular moment of our lives, during this particular event in history, during this particular Easter, we have the greatest opportunity to see Jesus 'amid life, hidden in a thousand faces' not in spite of, but BECAUSE OF, our pandemic.



This Easter, do not fail to recognize Jesus 'meeting us amid life, hidden in a thousand faces'. Today, if we recognize Jesus in others, we will be blessed with continuing resurrection surprises!



This is the Word of God, and it was delivered to the people of God, and the people of God responded, “Amen”.