Third Sunday of Easter All Saints’ Church

April 10, 2016 Year C

Acts of Apostles 9:1-6 Revelation to John 5:11-14

Psalm 30 John 21:1-19

Jesus has a closet full of disguises.

He is a gardener at the tomb calling out Mary’s name.

He is a ghost who can pass through solid walls and locked doors.

He is a short order cook, grilling fish on the beach.

He is a seasoned fisherman, directing the best place to throw nets.

He is a “not so clued in” traveler on the road to Emmaus, asking questions.

He is the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the prisoner, the sick and the lonely.

He is a horse trader, throwing Saul to the ground and blinding him.

Jesus is in the middle of our transformation, where our change from despair and defeat or “breathing threats and murder” are miraculously changed into proclaiming life and love. He is in our midst, coming to us in the way we need him to appear, dressed in the way which will open our eyes.

When I was in my early 30s, I was a chaplain on the Burn Unit of the New York Hospital. It was one of the most important times in my life, because with the help of nurses, doctors, social workers, aids, other chaplains, cleaning staff, patients, and families, I faced a lot of my fears and began to see that “living in Christ” was not so much an “enrichment plan” for fulfillment by my own doing, by my own making, but rather an invitation to die so that I could be reborn into surrender.

In other words, it wasn’t so much thinking my way into a new way of living, but rather living my way into a new way of thinking[[1]](#footnote-1): God’s way is the only way. I just had to get out of the way.

There was a solarium just outside the burn unit, where patients’ gathered to socialize, comfort, complain…. shoot the breeze, as we say. Quickly, it became the smoking room. These were the days that you could still smoke in hospitals and this was a convenient place to “light one up.”

I was with three men, all in their 20s, who had been living on the streets. One of the violent acts among the homeless during that time (and maybe still is) was to throw gasoline on your target, often your competitor, often for revenge, and then throw a match. All three had been victims of this type of attack, all while sleeping.

The gasoline on Joe landed below the belt, in the middle of his body, but mostly had affected his “private parts.” Whether the grafts were going to take on “that” organ were still up in the air. The gasoline on Jack was thrown on his shoes, and the bottom of his feet had been destroyed. Whether the grafts were going to take on his soles were still up in the air. Thomas’ back had been the target and he was sure his wife had been the perpetrator. No one really believed him, until the staff caught his wife under the hospital bed with matches and a flask of gasoline. She had been arrested and escorted out just a few days before.

As you can imagine, I was pretty much out of my depth, so little I knew of these men’s lives, but I was there, in the solarium, with smoke and ash rising, ministering to them as best I could.

Joe asked me, “Jamie, did you hear what Jack did for me.”

“No.”

“Well, we were out here, and I was smoking and I guess I fell asleep, and the cigarette caught my hospital gown on fire.”

“Jack, what did you do?” I asked.

“Well, I had been dozing too, but I smelled smoke, screamed, and I got up out of my wheelchair and walked over to him to put out the fire.”

“In the Burn Unit, on your new feet, you are putting out a fire? Wasn’t it painful to walk on your new feet? Weren’t you afraid?”

“Yeah, sure, but he’s my brother and man, I’m going to take care of him, no matter what. He’s been through too much. My feet mean nothing to me. Not compared to saving his life.”

And then Thomas raised his arms, waving them in the air and said, “Witness, Witness.”

“Oh, Thomas were you here and did you see the whole thing?”

“No, no. It’s just that my pastor used to always tell us, ‘when you see the Christ, wave your hands and yell, witness, witness.”

Oh my. Oh yes. Jesus has a closet full of disguises.

The whole solarium was transformed. The Christ had appeared. He is a street person, with bandaged feet, walking across a linoleum floor to put out a fire. He is an abused husband recognizing Love Incarnate and raising his hands in witness. He is a young kid fighting for his manhood, afraid and alone….. and grateful.

Love Incarnate does not seek to balance, to give or reclaim, to justify or weigh.

It just comes. Not as our agenda, but as God’s. Love loves; this is its nature.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In the beginning, God; in the end, God.[[3]](#footnote-3) Always and forever. Love.

In that solarium, maybe not right then and there, but soon after, it began to dawn on me that we never guide our own conversion. We are not developing our faith, rather, we are receiving it. We need to be receptive. We need to receive. And we need to give in, knowing that our own references that have ordered our lives will get struck down, and we will be thrown off a horse, changed forever. We need to die. Christ comes as a belt taking us to where we need to go.

With my fancy degrees, in my own privilege and power, in my security, these three men, appearing as the Christ, had woken me up to my own disguises of faith, direction, fear and hope.

God creates us as creatures who can live into a new way of thinking and being because God is already in our lives, reaching deep down in order to lift us up.

I think this is what Jesus means when Jesus says, “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find, knock and the door will open.”

Ask to die and in that surrender, a new world will emerge and you will become a new being.

1. One of Richard Rohr’s favorite lines. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Howard Thurman [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Desmond Tutu [↑](#footnote-ref-3)