

Sermon 20200418 Easter 3

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen

What does it mean to recognize someone?

On that first Easter evening, the disciples are in a locked room when Jesus appears among them. He looks like Jesus. He has the same voice. But he was killed! Are they seeing an apparition? Then Jesus does something totally ordinary. He eats a piece of fish. And they finally recognize the truth. God has raised Jesus. Life has the last word not death.

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In the passage we heard from Acts it is some fifty days later. Peter and John have gone up to the temple to pray. They encounter a man who is lame and begging at the gate. They call on Jesus' name and heal the man.

All around are astonished, for Jesus was the one people had thought was the Messiah. But he had been crucified by the Romans. How could Peter heal anyone in the name of one who had suffered such a shameful death?

But Peter knows what they are thinking and he says, "And now friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers." For though the people had recognized Jesus was the Messiah promised of God, they did not know what it really meant. Recognition is not only about putting a name to a face, but understanding who a person is and what that means.

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The people of Judea knew of God's promise to send them a Messiah to help them. In those times, suffering under Rome's dominion, they hoped for a Messiah to deliver them from the cruelty of Rome.

The chief priests and elders of the temple saw the people following Jesus. They saw the people believed Jesus was the Messiah and feared that Jesus' followers would instigate rebellion. There was no way that this rabble of poor peasants, with little weaponry could win against the might of Rome. They feared a failed rebellion would mean destruction of the whole nation. Their whole world would be gone!

Some suggest that Judas believed Jesus truly had the power to defeat Rome without the might of an army behind him. But instead of making moves to get rid of Rome Jesus made some weird statement about giving Rome the things that were Rome's and to God the things that were God's.

And Jesus wandered all over the countryside teaching, healing and throwing out demons. Judas thought if Jesus would only take up his power he could set everything right. So the betrayal was intended to make Jesus do the right thing. But Jesus did not take up the kind of power Judas expected him to. Jesus refused to use that power, even when it meant he would die.

The people, the temple leadership and Judas had a very narrow idea of what the Messiah was to do. They thought salvation would be accomplished by freeing the nation from the power of Rome. They wanted God to restore the life they used to have as an independent nation.

Hindsight is 20/20. We see the many times God called through scripture to help the widow, orphan, stranger and all those who had little power or resources in the world. We hear the prophets urged the people to 'seek justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God'.

Jesus' ministry to the sick, the hungry and outcast and his teaching to love both neighbour and enemy showed us that God means salvation goes beyond political lines. God's vision for the world is one in which life has the last word not death. It is one in which each person and all creation is treated with respect and dignity. God didn't want to go back to the way things because they weren't the way God saw they could be.

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Even with hind sight we can fall into the same trap.

Our opening hymn was a wonderfully uplifting traditional tune, written in 1965 with the words "The King of Glory comes, the nation rejoices."

When I said the word 'king', what comes to mind? You might think of a strong, powerful ruler who ensures the prosperity of the nation. You might think it is just a hereditary position – filled by accident of birth rather than skill. Perhaps you think of the doctrine of the divine right of kings which claims that God preordained the legitimacy of the monarch. You might

think of their wealth - we have a phrase – lives like a king. And you might think of the king's ability to order others around. Do you recall the old expression "he kings it over them"?

So the word "king" evokes both positive and negative images. But do we recognize Jesus in these images?

Didn't we see Jesus ride a donkey into Jerusalem? He wasn't wealthy, he didn't order others around and he healed both Jews and Gentiles. Jesus spent most of his ministry healing the sick, feeding the hungry and including those who had been cast out of mainstream society. Yet we persist in using images of a powerful king because we, like the Jews in Roman times, want and hope that God will send us someone to wave a sword or magic wand to fix the mess we're in.

We know Jesus set us an example of ministering to those in need but there is so much need it feels overwhelming! I mean can we really make a difference in the face of the COVID pandemic, the epidemic of drug overdosing, mass random killings, too many hungry and homeless, the suffering of the natural world, and the list goes on and on.

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God's answer to us is a resounding "YES"! Life has the last word not death.

First, we can stop thinking in terms of a 'king' or 'messiah' that will order everything into place and fix what is wrong with the world. God's way is one of love, not coercion. God invites us to step away from hierarchical systems in which some are important and the needs and desires of others are not. It's not just politically correct to be careful with our language and spend time learning how to dismantle racism and other barriers between people, it is part of God's plan to love our neighbour and our enemy.

Second, we can look around and see one person can make a difference. Over the past couple of weeks we have heard much about the life of Prince Phillip. He was the patron of hundreds of philanthropic causes and organizations around the world. Perhaps none is more well known than the Duke of Edinburg's Award, a program started in 1956 to recognize service and accomplishments of young people and encourage them to develop a

sense of public spiritedness that Prince Philip epitomized. Millions of young people in 140 countries have achieved this award.

Maybe we can't make that big a difference, but we don't have to be a member of the royal family to make a difference. There was a wonderful article in the Vancouver Sun this week. Gwen Madiba was visiting an emergency homeless shelter and overheard an exchange between an eight year old boy and his online teacher. The boy wasn't paying attention. With all the noise and distraction around him it was hard to concentrate. It was hard for the teacher to hear what the boy was saying. She suddenly realized that if all the kids had headphones their learning situation would be so much better! Two weeks into the campaign they already had more than half of what they needed to better the learning situation of all the kids in the shelter.

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Third, we are not in this alone. Jesus brought the outcast back into community because together we are stronger. There were two good news stories in the Richmond News. The grade 6&7 students of Mitchell Elementary did a big clean up of the Bath Slough and invited a native person to come talk to them about the slough and the native history around their school breaking down barriers.

Our Saviour Lutheran Church has a little used plot of land at the back of their property and are in the process of planting a bee and butterfly garden to improve the environment.

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The apostles saw the man by the gate needed healing and acted with Jesus' power to bring life.

So as you go into the world this week, remember that we too are invited to see and to act. We will be blessed with Jesus' strength as we participate in God's resounding "YES, life has the last word!"

AMEN