

MEETING CHRIST ON THE ROAD

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Based on Luke 24:13-16, 28-35

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One weekday morning several years ago when Ron and I were serving a church in Massachusetts, I had an important meeting down at the church office. It was not a planned meeting. There was simply a knock at the door. And when I opened it, there stood a disheveled man, down on his luck, probably in his forties, who called himself James. As he introduced himself, I managed to turn around and look outside my office window to the parking lot where there sat the most preposterous vehicle I had ever seen, an old junk-heap of a car spray-painted black with white stenciled lettering all across the sides and top and front, saying, "Jesus Christ is Lord."

The man began telling me a tragic tale of losing his wife and child in a house fire, and now he was going home to live with his mother and start his life over. As he spoke I noticed he was slurring his words. I interrupted him abruptly and looked straight in his eyes. "Are you on something?" I asked. "Because if you are, it's dangerous for you to be driving around in your car."

The man was taken aback by my question. He leaned forward very close to me and breathed right into my face. "I've never been on anything in my life," he said, looking *me* right in the eye. "I was a prize fighter and have been knocked around quite a bit." All this time, part of me was attempting to judge this character at my door, to sort and sift the truth or falsity of his statements, having become all too accustomed to con-artists walking into the church with their less than honest tales of woe. Another part of me simply wanted to be present to this man, to hear his story with full attention without judgment or suspicion.

Fortunately, for me, this latter part won out, and I suddenly had the uncanny feeling that in some deep and mysterious way I was being visited by the Christ. It was an eerie and wondrous sensation all at the same time. I stared into the stranger's light blue eyes, and though I knew that the man looking back at me was a guy who said his name was James, I thought that just for a moment none other than Christ was staring back at me.

"What do you need?" I asked. "Just some gas money to help me fill up my tank so I can get to my mother's place in Rhode Island. The priest next door gave me a couple of sodas and sandwiches. But now I just need money for gas."

I nodded my head silently as I went to my desk drawer where just a few days before I had stashed a few dollar bills. Now I found myself wondering if I was being merely foolish, or being a fool for Christ. "Here are nine dollars," I said, fishing out all the bills from the envelope. As the man took the money from me, his face lit up in a beautiful smile and he rested his hand on my right shoulder.

"This is a gift of love," he said, "and you will be repaid in love for it. When you have Jesus Christ, nothing else can touch you." And with that blessing upon me, he left. I closed the office door, went back to my desk, and like the two followers of Jesus on the road to Emmaus whose hearts burned within them when they suddenly realized that the risen Jesus had been among them, I too felt as if my heart were burning within me. I had just been visited in some way by Christ himself "...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me..." (Matthew 25:35). The words of Jesus echoed silently in my heart as I sat at my desk.

I have a feeling that meetings with Christ are taking place all the time. They are not a rare thing. The rare thing is for us to *recognize* Christ in the meeting. I have the feeling that every person who comes our way in the course of the day is an actual embodiment of Christ seeking to meet us in a very specific and particular way, to be recognized and loved. Imagine it! In some way or another, every person you meet today is bearing Christ, is *bringing* Christ to you, so that you may learn something new about how to love.

The same year that I met James in the church office, another stranger showed up at our church door one Sunday morning. Her name was Lily. She too was disheveled, but this was in part because she was very sick, her body riddled with cancer. She had had no previous connection with our church, but came simply because she had found our name in the Yellow Pages. After the worship service, a Deacon from our church came up to me and asked, "Who was that woman sitting next to me?" Then, before I had a chance to answer, she looked up into the air and heaved a deep sigh. "Why are you sighing?" I asked. "Because I already think I know who she is. She is the Christ dressed up as a sick and lonely woman." And with that, we both smiled gently, and knew that Christ had just given us a new glimpse of himself.

From that day onward, Lily began playing a very special role in the life of our church. Her illness soon prevented her from leaving her house. She had no relatives left, so some of women of the church began ministering to Lily on a daily basis, bathing her, feeding her, dressing her, reading to her, praying with her, loving her. Ron found an old stereo unit and set it up in her home, so she could listen to soothing, meditative music.

After a few weeks' time, Lily was in the hospital. She was visited daily by church members, who looked to her needs as she drew close to death, giving her foot-massages, anointing her with oil, and filling her room with flowers and pictures that their children had drawn.

Then one Saturday morning, Lily passed away, peacefully, quietly, like the petals of an Easter lily falling silently to the soft and welcoming earth. The men and women of the church who had ministered to her all those weeks now performed a small, simple service in the sanctuary in honor of Lily's life. They brought flowers, they sang, they spoke gratefully of the gifts Lily had given us all, and we could all feel her living presence there in that sanctuary. The scripture reading for the service was from The Song of Solomon: "I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valley. As a lily among brambles, so is my love....' Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.... My beloved is mine and I am his; he pastures his flock among the lilies...." (Song of Solomon 2:1ff).

A few weeks later, one of the women who'd ministered to Lily sent me a card with a picture of a girl picking wildflowers in a field, and she'd written these words on it: "There are many wildflowers to be found... I found a beautiful wildflower through Lily. She is gone - the wildflower remains in me." Now, so many years later, I recall Lily' as I gaze at the lilies up on this altar and take in their heavenly fragrance.

God is coming to us every minute of every day. God comes in the form of a vagrant named James in a beat-up jalopy. God comes in the form of a dying woman named Lily. God comes in the form of a husband, a wife, a partner, a child, a parent, a friend, a stranger. God comes wrapped in clothing that is not always pleasing to the eye. As Isaiah tells us, "He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account" (Isaiah 53:2ff). Sometimes we ask, in the midst of our troubles, where is God? But is it possible that God is not hidden; it is *we* who are hiding our eyes from *God*?

I think we hide from God by saying things like, "Oh no, here comes a bum looking for a hand-out," or, at coffee hour after church, "Oh no, must I talk to *that* annoying person again?" We forget in these moments, and in these faces, that it is the Christ himself who is coming to meet us. We may dismiss this by saying, "No, that's not Christ. That's just a drifter needing something from me. Or that's just an irritating church member talking my ear off. Or that's a difficult family member. What form has Christ been taking in your life lately? Is there a problem person at work? Is there someone in your family or in your neighborhood or in this church waiting for you to recognize the Christ in them?"

One place we can see fleeting images of Christ is on the news, perhaps in the face of a refugee boy in Darfur, in Sudan, Africa, weeping inconsolably for his lost family. It can be so wrenching to encounter Christ in this way that we might reach for the remote to turn the TV off. But then we hear Christ inwardly whisper, "I was suffering and you stayed with me." So we stay put. We cry. We pray. "So what?" we wonder. "What good is this? What good are my tears? What good is my broken heart? What good are my prayers?" And again we hear Christ answer, "Thank you for being with me: thank you for your presence, your prayers, your tears." In each of our experiences, even the most painful, Christ quietly moves among us, hoping we will notice him, comfort him, welcome him in.

A few days after the crucifixion of Jesus, he showed up as a stranger on the road to Emmaus, talking with two grief-stricken disciples who had no idea who he was. All they knew was that whenever he spoke, their hearts burned like living flames within them. Then when he stopped to eat a meal with them, their eyes were opened in the breaking of the bread. Through the simple act of communion, they recognized Christ.

Through our acts of communion with one another, whether at the Communion table, or down at Watertown Urban Mission, or at a Habitat worksite, or in the Salvation Army soup kitchen, we begin to recognize the Christ. This Stranger is here with us everyday, waiting for us to meet him with a cup of cold water, a smile, a tender word, a willingness to be his advocate in a world that doesn't always take good care of its children, its poor, its downtrodden.

When we come to this deep place of meeting, the Christ is revealed. And there is a communion so sweet that it carries the essence of heaven, the fragrance of lilies. This morning, and every morning, holds out the possibility for you and me to meet Christ. He is not far away. He is very near. Recognize him in whatever form he is presently taking to meet you. Be ready. Be open. Stay present. Prepare your cup of cold water, open your heart, open your eyes.

Let us pray. O God, you are here. Open our eyes that we may recognize you and give you our love. AMEN.

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