

Sermon for 3 Easter C
St. John's, Gloucester
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Imagine God showing up, unannounced, in your life one day:

"Dink-doo!" "Who's there?" "Why, it's God! Can I come in?"

Would you invite him/her in? If you do, what do you think God would say to you? Some people would immediately assume that God had bad news. They might jump to the outrageous conclusion that God would have it in for them. "You are **such** a loser! You have **failed**! You skipped church a few times—or a few hundred times—you drive too fast, you hold a grudge against your brother/mother/uncle/coworker/neighbor, you cheat on your diet, you don't give to the poor, you're a slob, you aren't entirely honest at work, I know your little—or not so little—addictions," etc. etc. etc. They might think that God has come to consign them to everlasting damnation—or worse, like being forced to attend non-stop Zoom meetings.

But there's precedent for this. In the Old Testament, God gets pretty ticked off at his people sometimes, and the results aren't pretty. The Flood is when God regrets ever making humans and decides to wipe them all—except Noah and his family—off the face of the earth. After the Israelites in the desert make and worship a golden calf, the Lord instructs the Levites to go through and kill a bunch of people, and three thousand are killed that day. When the Israelites repeatedly worship other gods and continually forget to serve the poor and vulnerable, God calls up the Assyrians and the Babylonians to conquer them. So, the God of the Old Testament is not afraid to come bringing judgment and death to her people.

But Jesus reveals a different way for God to relate to the people. Perhaps the OT is where God has to use a 2-by-4 to get their attention. But the resurrected Jesus reveals another side of God. We claim as Christians that this is the true nature of God—that the crucifixion and resurrection show us the ultimate God, the most true and pure nature of God.

So today we heard two stories of this resurrected God—Jesus—showing up unexpectedly in specific people's lives. In the Gospel of John, the disciples have seen Jesus at least twice, but he is gone again, and Peter decides to go back to work. Fishing. So he gets in his boat, fishes all night, and catches nothing. In the morning, someone on shore asks, "Caught any fish?" And they say, "No." And the person says, "Try over there," and they do and haul in a great catch. Peter understands that this is the Lord's doing and so leaps into the water to go to him, while the others drag in the fish-filled net.

Now remember, Peter is a big Loser. He publicly cut himself off from Jesus, not once, but three times after Jesus was arrested: "I do not know him!" This would be a great time for the avenging God to pour down wrath and punishment on Peter. But instead, the resurrected Lord gives him a huge catch of fish and proceeds to feed all the disciples a big banquet of bread and fish.

Once breakfast is over, Jesus has a private word with Peter. This could lead to severe consequences—Peter might have been a bit apprehensive. Jesus starts out: "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than the other disciples?" Peter says, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." OK, here it comes—so if you loved me, why did you deny me? But instead, Jesus simply says, "Feed my lambs." And Jesus asks

the same thing three times—do you love me? And when Peter answers, Yes, he says, Tend my sheep; feed my sheep. That's it. That and "You're going to be led to new places and into new difficulties—but follow me."

Jesus, arriving unexpectedly back into Peter's life, brings Peter fish and food, he heals him through forgiveness and through allowing Peter to affirm three times his love for Jesus—and then he gives him his life's work. "Feed my sheep." Jesus the Good Shepherd needs others to pastor the flock of new Christians—Peter's brothers and sisters in the Lord. That is Peter's job.

Paul has a similar experience of the resurrected God. It is several years later. The small band of Christians has been growing, and a Pharisee named Saul has been doing his best to eradicate this dangerous new sect. He has overseen the murder of Steven, and has been rounding up believers and hauling them into court. But he is stopped dead in his tracks one day as he is headed to Damascus. A light from heaven flashes, he falls to the ground, and he hears a voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "What? Who are you?" Saul asks. And the voice says, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." OK, now he's really in for it! Here comes punishment. And indeed, he is struck blind, and figures it's all over. He doesn't eat or drink for three days. Why bother? The end is near!

But it's not the end. The Lord goes to Ananias, a Christian who is completely afraid of Saul. But Jesus says, "Don't worry. I have chosen this man to carry my name to those outside Judaism, to the Gentiles. So go to Saul and lay your hands on him, that he may regain his sight." So that's what Ananias does: he goes to Saul and lays hands on him, saying, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road, has sent me that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And his blindness leaves, he is baptized, and then he eats and drinks again. He is born anew as a Christian, the very people he has been trying to stamp out. In addition, he has a very specific mission—to bring people outside of the Jews to knowledge and belief in Jesus.

Another big Loser is approached by the resurrected Jesus. Instead of punishment, Jesus brings healing of sight, so that Saul sees and understands who Jesus really is—he forgives him, feeds him, brings him a new life, and then gives him his mission and purpose in life.

So what would it be like to encounter God or the resurrected Jesus? What would God be like to you? What mission might God have in mind for you? If these two stories are any indication, we can expect at least two things: One is God's amazing, surprising reaction to our Loser-hood, our brokenness. In the book Eat, Pray, Love, Elizabeth Gilbert is at the end of her rope. She feels trapped in her marriage and petrified by the expectation that she have children and settle down. Each night after husband falls asleep, she goes into the bathroom and spends hours crying. Finally, drowning in grief, she reaches out to God . . . "Hello, God, I'm Liz. Pleased to meet you." But then she sobs out her confusion and concludes by begging, "Please tell me what to do. Please tell me what to do." And she said that at one point, an amazing stillness came over her. She just stopped crying. And in this stillness, she heard God's voice. "Go back to bed, Liz." Not really what she was expecting, yet a voice without judgment or punishment, a voice curiously filled with kindness and practicality. "Go back to bed."

The resurrected God meets us where we are with gentleness and compassion, where we usually expect condemnation. But the second thing is that God has a purpose in mind for us, a changed life that can lead into unexpected actions and places, but is rich and full.

In Liz's case, she goes on an odyssey of exploring her spiritual life, learning Italian, learning to meditate, learning to love and forgive herself, to open herself to gratitude and creativity. In our case, well, who knows? You have to pay attention and see where Jesus leads. Jesus said to Peter, "Earlier you went where you wanted, but now you will go where you are led. So follow me." Are you ready?

Let us pray. . . . AMEN.