

“Never Seen Before!”

a sermon by

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Text: “Oh Lord, you have searched me and you know me” (Psalm 139:1).

I have something to show you. By showing it to you, I am in a way seeking to mimic sacramental theology; I want to incarnate, or en-flesh, the point this morning. Not only do I have something to show you, I have something to show you that you have never seen before. Nobody in this sanctuary has ever seen what you will see. More than that, nobody has ever seen it; nobody who has ever lived in the entire history of the human race, has ever seen what I am going to show you, what you will shortly see.

Here: it is in this brown paper shopping bag. You can tell, I hope, that there is something in this bag ... that “something” has never been seen in history! [*I am sensing some skepticism! Would I mislead you? During a sermon? In church?*] What then is this hitherto unseen thing? [*I’ll show you later!*]

It is not unlike our New Testament lesson.

Two weeks ago all across the world the church’s Easter focus was on the resurrection as an event, and rightly so. Paul says, “If Christ be not raised, we of all people are most to be pitied.” If Christ be not raised, if the resurrection was not an event, if it was and is simply a notion, an idea, a feeling, we of all people are “most to be pitied.” All our ideals and efforts, our mission and service, our struggles for social justice, environmental sanity, and international

peace: all our proclamation of hope and love, our worship and praise: all this is pitiable—if Christ be not raised, if the resurrection was not an event. Such is the church’s Easter message. *[It is too much for some in the church! Pitiable.]*

The language which describes this event circles around two poles.

First, there is the recurring passive voice: “Christ has been raised.” In speaking this way, using the passive voice, the New Testament emphasizes and insists upon the intervening power of God. Had God’s intervening power not been there, the bones of Jesus would yet lie in Palestine to await discovery by some archaeologist.

But, this rushes us to the second pole; “He is not here!” That is the message that greets those first Easter visitors to the empty tomb. He, the man you buried, is not here, in the grave where you buried him! This news smashes, shatters, and transforms their expectations. You expect a dead and buried person to stay in place; you expect all sorts of things. “He is not here” smashes all our expectations.

The two poles go together. We are imprisoned in our expectations without the intervening power of God. Writing this week in the Wall Street Journal, Peggy Noonan echoes this. She says:

I saw an old friend on (the commuter train into) Washington, and he told me of the glum, grim faces at the station he'd left, all the commuters with newspapers in their hands and under their arms. This was the day after Virginia Tech. We talked about what was different this time, in this tragedy. I told him I felt people were stricken because they weren't stricken. When Columbine happened, it was weird and terrible, and now there have been some incidents since, and now it's not weird anymore. And that is what's so terrible. It's the difference between "That doesn't happen!" and "That happens."

Our expectations are not always of the high ground and the bright horizons; often we expect only doom and gloom and dismal prospects. But, Easter proclaims, “Christ has been raised! He is not here!” and the potentially most pitiable are summoned to a life of excitement; the naïve to informed determination, and the cautious to reckless hope. That is the Easter message of the resurrection as an event.

But, the New Testament surprisingly does not stop there. To the stories of the empty tomb, it adds stories of the Risen Lord’s appearances. In Jerusalem and in Galilee, we are told, the Risen Christ appeared; he was seen.

[Speaking of seeing: I have not forgotten the promise of this brown paper bag! Before I am finished, you are going to see something nobody has ever seen before. Not yet though]

These stories teach us that the Risen Lord appeared in order to send. The supreme example is in Matthew 28. The appearance story concludes with the Great Commission, “Go...make disciples of all nations.” The Risen Lord appears in order to speak and what he says is: “Go ... Tell.”

The appearance stories have a purpose and a point; they are, what the theologians call, missional. They exist to show that Christ sent and continues to send.

Yet they also have their own inner power.

Our lesson too has its own inner power. It is laden with compelling images; they sparkle and leap across the page and off the words. To read the story is like watching the crowd during the Super Bowl half-time show; nothing but an exploding array of flashbulbs. Let's try and catch a glimpse of those popping images.

“Peter said, ‘I am going fishing’” [John 21:3.] He was off; back to his former life; not out for an afternoon with his fly rod; no, he was going back ...back to work, back to fishing, back to his former, pre-Jesus life. Dangling like a worm on the hook between denial and reinstatement, all Peter could do was go back, a man with no future, just a past. Sad.

“Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize it was Jesus” [John 21:4.] This stranger on the shore, unrecognized despite having been seen by them in Jerusalem twice “behind locked doors,” was able to direct them; this stranger was the one to guide them, to give them the information they needed. And so, from the unrecognized stranger on the shore, these post-Easter disciples take advice; they listen to an unknown voice, do these post-Easter disciples. Amazing.

“Peter jumped into the water” [John 21:7.] Reckless and courageous; Peter's faults and virtues all at the same time; a blend of impetuosity and resolution; Peter plunges ahead and in doing so succeeds only in leaving his comrades behind ... to do the work, to haul the bulging net ashore. Pathetic.

“(Jesus tended) a fire of burning coals ... with fish on it, and some bread” [John 21: 9.] Bread and fish at dawn, the elements of the original Christian sacred meal; breakfast in Galilee, a feast of the new Israel, the nourishment for another chance. Wonderful.

Flashing images! This passage is all about seeing. Thus it sums itself up [John 21:14] “This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.” It is an appearance story. It is about seeing.

What was seen? What is the story’s inner power? They saw the Risen Lord, of course. But, they had seen him before. Did they see anything new this time; anything they had never seen before? Did they see something nobody had ever seen before?

What about the brown paper bag? What is in here? It is time; let me show you.

Let me show you now. What is this? How disappointing is that? A banana! A regular, ordinary, unexciting banana. Besides, even if none of you had ever seen it before, many others have seen it: me, for I put it in the bag, the grocery sales clerk and the fruit department guy, the shipper, the packer and the picker. I have no idea, but I would not be surprised if this very banana has not been seen by several hundred people. So, what of my promise? An example of more empty religious language? Another bankrupt piece of preacher’s hyperbole? Yet another, let-down and the church’s failure to deliver?

I told you, I promised you, you would see something you had never seen before, and that no living soul in history had ever seen. I meant it. And now I will keep my promise.

[Peel banana.]

Ah, there! Encased, entrapped, protected, inside: here it is; this very banana, until this instant in time, has never been seen before ever! And, to be seen, it has to come out; it has to be released. It has to be unwrapped to be seen; freed from its encasing “expectations.”

That is how it was with the disciples from our lesson.

Now, finally they see something they have never seen before. What is that?

Themselves. Themselves as disciples of the Risen Lord; no longer mere followers of Jesus, to come and go, listen or not, to question or quibble, to be inspired or challenged. Now, they are to be identified in a new way; a radically novel way, a stunning, irrational, shattering way. They are now called to live, not by expectations, but only by the intervening power of God. They are to be disciples of the Risen Jesus Christ.

As are we.

Can you see it?

As are we.

Do you see it?

The only proof of the resurrection is resurrected people. You!

Are you a mere follower of Jesus, or are you a disciple of the Risen Lord, who explodes the limits of all expectations and holds before you and the very world the way of hope, and love, and peace, and sanity. This Risen Lord summons his disciples to a life of reckless and ever deepening faith; of boundless and ever striving hope; of broad and never judging love.

Is this who you are Christian people?

Years ago a Hasidic saint, Rabbi Zoisha, when approaching death was asked if he was nervous at all about meeting his Maker. To their surprise he conceded that he was and when asked why he replied: Because I know he will ask me not why were you not more like Abraham; why were you not more like Moses; why were you not more like David; but, he will ask me: why were you not more like Zoisha?

Followers of Jesus: why are we not more like resurrected people?

Followers of Jesus: let us peel back the encasing limits of our own expectations and let us live only by the power, the intervening power, of the love of God.

Followers of Jesus: know this: resurrected people, living with reckless faith, unbounded love, and limitless hope, have always made the world nervous, but resurrected people have always been and still are the world's lasting hope.

Go: tell; live by the limitless power of the intervening love of God.

Amen.

[Soli Deo Gloria]