

3rd Sunday of Easter – 30 April 2017
Luke 24:13-35

This is a wonderful Gospel story, especially as it follows on the heels of Mary's immediate believing on Easter Sunday and then Thomas' healthy doubt last week. This story of the two men walking and talking and being joined by a stranger whom they do not recognize until the breaking of the bread is a beautiful way to encourage all of us to trust and believe that we will have faith, and we will understand as well, in our own ways and in the right time.

Some people of faith seem to have that unshakeable faith that seems to defy all common sense and reality. For some reason, beyond *our* comprehension, they simply believe in Jesus Christ and always have. There is a way of presence with them that speaks of *Jesus Christ's* presence as well, and this presence emanates from them and you sometimes find that it is easier to believe in Jesus just by being in their space.

When I was a student at Bishop Cronyn Church in London, there was a grand lady who was part of the congregation. Her name was Charlotte. She was well into her 90's, living in her own apartment in a Seniors' complex that was attached to the church. Every week she would slide from one side of the building to the other with her walker and wearing her fuzzy slippers, for midweek Church and Bible Study. Charlotte was born in Ireland and had lived through some of the 'troubles', as she called them. She lost many of her siblings to influenza and her husband was killed in the War. For all intents and purposes, Charlotte would have had every right to be a bitter, grumpy old woman, but she wasn't. She never remarried and had lived as a widow for many decades, moving to Canada to be closer to her young relatives who had moved here.

My supervisor, the Rector of the Church, suggested that I go to visit Charlotte after we had discussed my concerns about people who seem to just accept faith without engaging in it intellectually. (I thought Peter was just sending me on a pastoral visit to keep an old lady company and say a prayer. Little did I know that he was sending me on a journey into a holy place with a profoundly spiritual person.)

After we had tea and cookies and all the formalities had taken place, Charlotte asked me quite directly if I had ever seen Jesus. I sat up straighter and began sharing with her all my seminary training about seeing Jesus in the homeless and in the housebound, etcetera, etcetera. She listened very politely, and then she asked again, "Have you ever seen Jesus?" I must have looked somewhat confused because she told me to close my eyes and sit still, take a deep breath and then open my eyes again. When I opened my eyes, I noticed that Charlotte was looking at something to my right and she had an absolutely rapturous look on her face. When she came out of her reverie she just laughed and said, "He thinks you're not ready yet".

Charlotte then went on to tell me that after a bout with scarlet fever when she was a wee child, during which she saw Jesus the shepherd surrounded by his lambs, she had had many, many occasions when he had just appeared to her wherever she might be. His constant presence with her was her boon companion and she shared with me that whenever things got too hard to handle he would show up and tell her that he could handle everything. All she had to do was put her trust in him.

I left that visit and went directly to speak to Peter, my supervisor. He was expecting me. The same thing happened the first time he had visited her as well. Peter helped me to

acknowledge what I knew to be true – Charlotte was not a lunatic who saw things that were not there. She was a Mary Magdalene whose faith in Jesus showed itself quite literally by showing itself in the form of Jesus. What Charlotte saw was not an illusion or the long-desired hope of an old befuddled lady. What she saw, what she experienced, was the very presence of Jesus right before her, real and true and in a lasting, eternal relationship.

Another parishioner who taught me a lot was an old curmudgeon named Doug who was in his 60's, divorced, drove an old diesel Mercedes and who carved duck decoys. He was also a very learned man who prided himself in knowing more about Christianity than any priest who had ever set foot in the doors at Cronyn, which was saying something because quite a few of the seminary professors worshipped there as well!

Doug too had a very deep faith, but unlike Charlotte, his faith did not grow out of a vision. His grew slowly and steadily through study and questions; through periods of deep doubt and even sometimes, great despair. Doug was our resident “doubting Thomas”. Anything new that came along, from women in ministry to new liturgies, to new discoveries about Jerusalem and the Holy Land, were all fodder for his mill. He would read everything he could get his hands on. He would ask questions and take courses. He would, with great regularity, challenge everything the Rector said about theology and faith, not to be ignorant or cantankerous but because that was how he learned.

Not long after I had begun working at Bishop Cronyn as a student, Doug came to the clergy team, which he considered me a part of, and told us that his ex-wife had been diagnosed with cancer and she only had a few months to live. He felt he needed to make amends and he wanted the ‘female student’ to walk with him on this path because a “girl would probably get it faster than a man”. (I think he was referring to the work he needed to do with his wife, and not the faith stuff.) Recognizing that this was just Doug's way, I set my personal opinions about being referred to as “a girl” aside and I began having conversations with Doug. His wife died much sooner than expected. I believed that Doug would come undone, as all his book-learning could not truly give him the answers he needed about his guilt and his loneliness and his fears about what next.

After he returned from her funeral, we had one last cup of coffee together. He seemed quite at peace with everything and when I asked him how he was doing, he said he had realized that all of his study had brought him 2 things: first, he had discovered what all the great thinkers of the Church had to say about Jesus Christ; and second, he realized that somewhere in all of that studying, Jesus had become very much a part of his life.

Doug never had visions of Jesus the way Charlotte did but his faith in Jesus Christ was certainly as strong. It just took on a different way of being experienced and being expressed. He found Jesus, and his relationship with Jesus in the study he had done and in the relationships with those whom he worshipped and discussed those studies.

Charlotte and Doug each had great faith and they came about it from opposite directions, but there is yet another way that many people come about having faith as well – through personal on-going experience. Mary Magdalene's faith was experiential too but hers was in a moment. She heard, she saw, she knew, she believed.

For some, the experiential coming-to-faith experience is a bit more drawn out, like the men who were walking the road to Emmaus. These were not newcomers to this whole "Jesus thing". They were already familiar with him, pre-crucifixion. They were not members of that inner core of 12 disciples but they had heard the rumblings about all that had happened and the rumours that Jesus had risen from the dead. They were not as skeptical as Thomas seemed to be, but they were wondering and pondering and discussing if it was possible that all of these things could be true.

When Jesus walked with them along the Emmaus Road, they were kept from recognizing Jesus as he joined them. They were given the gift of experiencing his presence but only in hindsight were they able to say "aha, I knew there was something familiar"! For some reason, God kept them from immediately recognizing Jesus and only when it came time to break bread together were their eyes open.

Sometimes, whether we understand why in the moment or not, God does seem to veil our lives and our faith in mystery. We are left with questions and wondering. We are not always automatically given the clear and certain answers, or even faith, that we may wish. But there is purpose behind the mystery. Sometimes, like the men who wondered as they wandered, we need that journey in pondering in order to do the work of preparation for that moment when, in the breaking of the bread, or in the letting go of life, or in the moments of greatest need we will be able to recognize not only the One who is before us, but also the One who was always with us.

I have never had a vision of Jesus as Charlotte did. I have never been as focussed on studying about Jesus as Doug was. I have, however, had those times when I have seemed to be wandering and struggling and questioning and then *realizing* in the Eucharist, or in another person, or in the nature that is all around us that Jesus is indeed here, and, alas, he has always been beside me. My faith was not weak but I needed to grow into the understanding of that faith in ways that prepared me for the glory of what I was about to witness.

There is not one, set way to come to faith in Jesus Christ. There is no correct way to experience God's love. There is no textbook or pattern that we need to follow in order to come closer to God's love. We simply need to open ourselves up to the way that Jesus will enter into our lives and then be willing to "be" in his presence.

We are called to faith in Jesus Christ but we will all take a different path to get there. No one else's is right for you. You need to be open to discovering what that path will look like for yourself, and when you find it, be prepared because the presence of Christ is indeed overwhelming and astounding.