

Bear Butte Pastor's Conference April 11, 2007
Meditation on John 20:11-16 by Pastor David Van Kley

Mary doesn't recognize Jesus, though she's looking right at him. Strange, isn't it? After all, she'd spent the better part of three years with him. She loved him more than anyone else in the world. Yet, there he is, standing right next to her, and she doesn't know him.

Of course, she wasn't expecting him. He was dead, after all, consigned to linen wrappings in a tomb. What business did he have showing up in jeans and a T-shirt, looking like a gardener? You've had that experience: seeing someone you know, but being unable to recall their name, because you weren't expecting them. It was like that for Mary.

Maybe it was also because he'd changed so much. His body raised was unlike the body she was familiar with. That seems logical: not that any of us has seen someone raised from the dead, but you'd think there'd be major changes!

Still, it **is** strange. Just as it was strange when the two disciples on the road to Emmaus walked for miles with Jesus and did not recognize his voice. In that case, it was the sharing of the sacrament—the breaking of the bread—that opened their eyes...and ears. In this case, it was the word, the sound of her name on Jesus' lips that opened Mary's ears...and eyes.

We, too, fail to recognize the risen Lord, as he comes to us, through an adversary at a church council meeting, the threadbare drifter standing on our doorstep, the colleague with whom we disagree about matters of theology and ministry. We fail to recognize the risen Lord when we are looking right at him, because we weren't expecting him or at least, we weren't expecting him to look or sound like **that!**

Yet, from the very beginning, the risen and still incarnate Lord makes his presence known in surprising ways, at unexpected times, through the least likely candidates—gardeners, strangers on the road, and yes, even **pastors!**

Speaking of which: lately, I've been a little worried about who will become our next bishop. You see, after so many years, I've become used to the one we have. It's hard for me to imagine a bishop not wearing glasses and a skirt. A person with different priorities and different gifts. I look at the list of candidates and say: who **are** these guys?!!

Yet, the promise of God is that Christ Jesus is with us always. That, through the Holy Spirit, Christ has made God's home among us. That together, we are the body of Christ—differently gifted, yet united for the sake of mission. Each of us a sinner, yet created in God's image and washed clean in Jesus' blood. Each of us a saint, yet beset by failings, common to all and unique to each.

Maybe any one of us could be bishop and it wouldn't matter all that much. For Christ

is risen, incarnate.

Some years ago, my best friend was the front-runner in the election of bishop in the Northern Great Lakes Synod. I really wanted him to be elected: he is one of the best preachers I've ever heard and a fine pastor. I was dismayed when another person, someone I'd never even heard of, climbed through the ranks during the balloting and was elected instead. Yet, this man proved to be a wonderful bishop. And many were the times I gave thanks that my good friend had not received the call.

Do you remember the novel **The Power and the Glory**, written many years ago by Graham Greene? It is the story of a priest, laboring in southern Mexico early in the twentieth century, during a time of injustice, civil unrest and persecution of radical elements within the church. This priest served faithfully in the sense that he brought word and sacrament to the peasants. They loved him: he was their means of grace, their lifeline to Christ. He was also deeply flawed. He drank too much. He had a mistress. Caught in the web of his own cynicism, he struggled with doubt, guilt, shame.

Though he knew himself to be a coward, the military considered him a threat. They executed him and it seemed as if the poor he served had been cut off from God.

Yet, the novel closes with a knock on a peasant's door. A man quietly identifies himself to the child who opens it: "I am a priest." We understand: nothing—not even death—can destroy the powerful love of the risen, incarnate Lord.

Only in this confidence dare we who are flawed and faithful, speak the word and break the bread.

Only in this confidence, dare we call one to serve among us as bishop.

Amen.

--Pastor David Van Kley