

Easter 3A 2023

After Jesus' resurrection, he appears several times, maybe as many as twelve, to different groups of people.

Three of those times, people initially did not recognize him.

Taken together, these three times teach us something about what prevents *us* from discovering God around us.

Jesus' first post-resurrection appearance is to Mary Magdalene.

Even though she has heard from other women who had gathered at the empty tomb that an angel had told them that Christ had arisen, when Mary actually sees someone near the empty tomb, she assumes that he is the gardener.

At this moment, Mary is weeping and fearful.

She does not recognize Jesus until he calls her name and she hears his voice.

She then is drawn out of her concerns, out of herself, into the surprise of the present reality.

As for the other women who had been at the tomb and actually heard the angel tell them of the resurrection, *they* are already feeling hopeful.

When Jesus later appears to them, they do not fail to recognize him.

Jesus' third appearance occurs when two unnamed disciples are on their way to Emmaus.

They encounter a person on the road and do not recognize him to be Jesus.

Instead of seeing what God is doing in the present, they remain stuck in the past and even tell him the whole sad tale of betrayal and crucifixion.

“Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?”

You can sense them rolling their eyes.

Jesus tries to bring them out of their funk, to open their eyes to how God can bring good even out of things that are bad.

“Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?”

but the two do not get out of their heads until Jesus breaks bread.

At that point, they begin to focus on the present and recognize him.

When they finally see Jesus in the stranger, they recall that earlier, their hearts had burned within them.

They had felt something, in other words, from the beginning, but were too distracted by their own negative emotions to pay attention.

I think we can all identify with that.

Jesus' eighth appearance, by some reckonings, is when certain of the disciples are fishing on the Sea of Galilee and he talks to them initially from the shore.

They are having a hard time, not having caught any fish.

Jesus gives them some instruction, whereupon they catch a large number.

Once they know that dinner awaits, no longer distracted by their worries, they feel relieved and only then do they recognize Jesus.

On all three of these occasions when people failed to recognize God at work, it was because they were not in the present moment.

They were turned inward, blinded by sadness, fear, worry, and maybe a little self-pity.

It is not until we step outside ourselves that we can be present and see clearly,

We find God only in the present, not in the things that happened in the past.

We later might recognize that God had been working in the past, but God is no longer working there.

God has moved on.

It is for us to choose hope, to choose joy, concepts that are not well understood.

It is for us to look with wonder as one of the primary components of life falls freely out of the sky and replenishes the creation, sustaining plants and animals and ourselves, or to say, “But I wanted to wear suede today!”

My spiritual director was telling me that someone asked Bishop Tutu the difference between optimism and hope.

Tutu said that optimism was a feeling, but hope was a determination.

We choose to hope based on our trust in God.

Similarly, we distinguish between happiness and joy.

Happiness is a state of distraction from reality.

Joy is what we feel when we know that what happens has purpose and is not the end of the story, but has a place in God’s narrative.

We choose to see things in terms of joy.

I have seen people who were joyful even as they were dying.

It was not that they did not prefer to live.

Given the choice, they would have stayed around, but they knew that what was happening to them was not a disaster, that God had not abandoned them, that the story did not end with their death, and that brought joy.

Choosing hope and joy means being open to what God might be doing.

It means being open to being surprised by God every day.

As my spiritual directory was saying (there was a lot of serendipity between the gospel and our conversation this month), as my spiritual directory was saying, if we are not surprised by God every day, then it may be that we are not attune to God.

Like the disciples, in other words, we may be so focused on our sadness, fear, worry, and self-pity that we are unable to see Jesus right in front of us.

We have the option of choosing hope, choosing joy, choosing life, choosing God.