

“First Pres at the Core: Encountering Jesus”
Sermon series on the Core Values of our Church
Dr. Peter B. Barnes
September 20, 2015
(John 20:19-29)

Reminder about the Mission Statement from last week. Say it with me. “Our mission is to invite all people to say ‘yes!’ to Jesus with their whole lives.”

Have you ever had a chance encounter with someone famous? You’re someplace ordinary just minding your own business when all of a sudden you run into a celebrity? Maybe you get a little start struck, and you experience that little flutter in your stomach. Have you ever had that happen to you?

Many years ago when our kids were growing up and we lived in Colorado, Lorie was at the Beaver Creek ski resort, standing in line to sign up our kids for ski school, when all of a sudden out of the corner of her eye she saw someone she thought was Amy Grant, the Christian recording artist. Amy was at the height of her popularity then, and we listened to her music all the time. Apparently Amy was there to sign up her kids for ski school too.

Lorie quietly walked over to where Amy was, and she stood next to her. And without looking at Amy, she said in a very soft tone, “I know who you are, and I won’t make a big scene. But my kids would love to meet you.”

Amy could not have been nicer. Lorie told the boys, “This is Amy Grant. You know, the person whose music we listen to all the time?” The eyes of our children got as big as saucers, and they were star struck when they met the famous recording artist. “Nice to meet you,” they said as they shook her hand almost in shock.

Later that afternoon, I met up with the family. They said, “You won’t believe who we met this morning!” They proceeded to tell me the story of the encounter with Amy Grant. I was so bummed that I had missed out on all the fun and excitement.

After we piled into the car to head back down the mountain to the house where we were staying, we were driving along the road, when all of a sudden there was Amy walking on the side of the road. One of the kids pointed her out and yelled, “There she is!”

I slowed the car down to a crawl, rolled down the window and said, “Hey, Amy, do you need a ride back to your condo?”

She looked at us with a startled expression and muddled nervously, “No thanks; my house is nearby.” And she started walking a little faster. By now Amy probably wondered if we were a family of stalkers!

Just a few years ago, we got to see Amy Grant again after one of her concerts. We were the guests of a mutual friend, and he took us back stage to see her. Once again Amy couldn’t have been nicer. She was so friendly and approachable. When we related to her the story of our encounter at the ski school many years before, we all laughed about what happened way back then with the chance encounter.

This morning we continue in our new sermon series on the core values of First Presbyterian Church, and we’re going to talk about the first, and some might argue the most important core value – Encountering Jesus. The passage of Scripture we’ve read this morning in John 20 to talk about this core value records an encounter that the disciples had with Jesus after His resurrection.

When Christ appeared to the disciples back then, it wasn't an encounter with a celebrity recording artist. It was an encounter with the risen Savior of the world. And the impact of that encounter changed their lives forever.

*

The Session and the 20/20 Vision Team wrestled with which core values to identify that were at the heart of the spiritual DNA of our church and the heart of our mission. They asked themselves, "What do we value the most, and how should we characterize these core passions and commitments we want to make as we follow Christ together?" We discussed many different values, and all of them were pretty important. But this value of encountering Jesus kept rising to the top of the list, and the reason for this is because of the priority of its importance. You could argue that all of the other values follow after and flow from this one value, because if you don't encounter Jesus through a church's ministry, none of the other values really matter that much.

What we're trying to do here at First Pres isn't to be a *religious social club* in which we can all get together with people who have similar outlooks on life and create a community where, like in the TV show Cheers, everyone knows your name. We're also not a *social service center* in which we're trying to help people and correct the problems and injustices of the world. And we aren't a *society of religious rituals* where we gather to sing and pray, and ask God's blessing on our children when they're born, or on them when they get married, or over our loved ones when they die and pass away.

The faith we profess at First Presbyterian Church is about an encounter with Jesus Christ, and if you don't encounter Jesus while you're involved in all these other activities, then you're missing the point all together. Pope Francis said it well in his homily the first Advent after he was elected pope. In his sermon the holy Father said, "The most important thing that can happen to a person is to encounter Jesus, who loves us, who has saved us, and who gave His life to us."¹ Pope Francis is right.

*

Philip Yancey begins his book *The Jesus I Never Knew* with a chapter titled "The Jesus I Thought I Knew," and he writes about all the ways he had misconceptions about Jesus when he was growing up. This confusion was only compounded in his years as a student in Bible College, and increasingly Jesus became more and more remote to him and an object of scrutiny.

He writes that he memorized the list of thirty-four specific miracles recorded in the Gospels, but he missed the impact of even one miracle himself. He learned the Beatitudes, yet he never faced the fact he couldn't live them personally. It was only later when he began to realize that Jesus was a real human being with a name and a family, a person who was in a way just like everyone else, that Philip began to discover the real Jesus, and he encountered the Lord personally himself. When Philip encountered the real Jesus, his life took on a whole new dimension. It was like seeing everything in black and white before, and after the encounter everything was in color.

There are a lot of misconceptions about Jesus these days, and often we don't see Him as He really is. I came across some images (images are posted at the end) that depict a few of these misconceptions, and I want to share them with you this morning. They're pretty funny. There is: Spooky Jesus, Heart of Gold Jesus, Hip Dude Jesus, Now-There-Little-Lamb Jesus, Fashion Statement Jesus, Grandpa Jesus, I-Fell-Asleep-Knocking Jesus, Boyfriend Jesus, Rastafarian Jesus, Handsome Model Jesus, Bedroom Eyes Jesus, and, my favorite, Homeboy Jesus!

It's easy to laugh at these images, but I think each of us has to admit that we all have some misconceptions about Jesus of our own which get in the way of an authentic encounter with Christ. Every one of us has mistaken notions about who Jesus really was and how we can encounter Him now. I find that in my own life the Lord consistently breaks out of the little boxes into which I try to put Him, and He regularly corrects my flawed perspective.

In his book *Further Along the Road Less Traveled*, Scott Peck writes that when he first read the Gospels he approached them skeptically, suspecting that he would find public-relations accounts written by authors who tried to tie loose ends together and embellish their biographies of Jesus. But the Gospels disabused him of that notion very quickly. Peck writes that he was absolutely thunderstruck by his encounter with the real Jesus, and it changed his life forever. It did for all the disciples, too.

*

One story in the Gospels about an encounter with Jesus that gives us a great deal of insight is the one in John 20 we've read this morning. The passage tells us that on the evening of the first day of the week, Easter Sunday when Jesus rose from the dead, the disciples were together, and they had all the doors locked because they were afraid. They feared that if the Jews and the Romans conspired together to kill Jesus, then they might be next. It was in this context that they encountered the risen Lord. Jesus walked right through the locked doors, and He stood among them. He said, "*Peace be with you! As the Father has sent Me, I am sending you.*" And with that He breathed on them and said, "*Receive the Holy Spirit*" (Jn. 20:21,22).

Later on, the disciples told Thomas, who wasn't with them that night, about their encounter with Christ. Thomas didn't believe them, and he boldly stated, "*Unless I see the nail marks in His hands, ...and put my hand in His side, I won't believe it*" (Jn. 20:25). A week later the disciples were in the house again, and this time Thomas was with them. All the doors were locked once more, but even so Jesus came and stood among them as He had done before. And He invited Thomas to carry out the examination of His wounds the disciple said he wanted to make, and the Lord urged the disciple to stop doubting and believe. Thomas cried out, "*My Lord and my God!*" (Jn. 20:26).

There are several things I want you to notice about the disciples' remarkable encounter. First, ***they encountered Jesus in the midst of their fear.*** The disciples were gathered behind locked doors, and they were afraid. I think Jesus often meets us in the middle of our fears. Sometimes that's when we encounter Him the most. When we're fearful of the future, when we're afraid of what someone might do to us, when we're scared of what could happen next, that's when we turn to Jesus and encounter Him in a fresh way.

What are you afraid of today? What is the locked door of fear you're hiding behind? And how does God want to meet you this morning right in the middle of your fears here and now? Perhaps you can encounter Jesus in the midst of your fear this morning.

Second, notice that ***they encountered Jesus in the midst of their doubt.*** Thomas was convinced there was no way Jesus could have risen from the dead, and he wasn't willing to believe unless he saw it with his own eyes and even touched Jesus' wounds with his own hands. But when the Lord showed up and invited Thomas to carry out his examination, the disciple discovered he wasn't the skeptic he thought he was. And he fell at Jesus' feet and cried out, "My Lord and my God!"

What enabled Thomas to overcome his doubts? What was it that changed his mind? Was it that Jesus was able to walk through locked doors? Was it that the Lord knew everything Thomas

had said a week before in laying down his conditions for believing? Or was it that Jesus accommodated his weak faith in meeting those very demands?

Perhaps all of these were involved, but I think that what really captured Thomas' heart and changed his mind were the wounds of Jesus. When the Lord appeared to the disciples, He showed them His scars, and it was in showing them His scars that they knew Him. No halo, no sounding of trumpets, just scars. And it was in the wounds He bore on the cross of Calvary that the disciples knew just how much Jesus loved them.

Are you struggling with doubt this morning? Are you resistant in your mind to the claims of Christ and the truth about Christianity? Jesus will meet you in the middle of your doubts, and He's even willing to accommodate your lack of faith, just like He did with Thomas. You can encounter Jesus even if you wrestle with doubt today.

Notice also the three things Jesus said to the disciples in this encounter. First, He spoke a word of *peace* to them to help ease their fears. Next, He issued them a charge to give them a *purpose* and a plan – “*As the Father has sent Me, I am sending you.*” And finally, Jesus promised them His *presence*. He breathed on the disciples and gave them the Holy Spirit. The **peace, purpose and presence** of Jesus was at the heart of the disciples' encounter with Christ, and it's at the heart of our encounters with the risen Lord too.

*

People encounter Jesus all the time. An older woman has spent 20 years alone in a nursing home. She should be bitter and miserable. Instead, she glows with joy. And when asked of what she thinks about all day long, she replies, "I think about my Jesus. He's been awfully good to me, you know."

A bright, wealthy, handsome young man lost everything, and he wound up in prison. And there in a prison cell, through a bunch of other inmates serving life sentences, Jesus came shining through. And this man found a life that he never knew when he was living in the penthouse suite.

A lawyer's secret addiction to alcohol finally became unmanageable, and it robbed him of his family, his career, and all his possessions. He found Jesus in a dingy basement of a rehab center in a circle with some other drunks.

It happened one day to a self-righteous Pharisee named Saul. It happened to an ostracized and lonely tax collector named Zacchaeus. It happened to a slave trader named John Newton. And it happened to a humble, little activist named Mother Teresa.

John Ortberg writes, "Jesus comes shining through. In places of enormous human despair and loneliness, through the unmatched beauty of Jesus' life and the unrivaled brilliance of his teaching, the Man on the Cross calls out for us to join Him once more. The Man of Sorrows meets people in their tears in ways no one else can. In the strangest places and most unexpected ways, the best reason to believe in God has a face and a name. Jesus comes shining through."

*

Have you encountered Jesus? Have you met the Savior? Was there ever a time in your life when you experienced His love and His grace and the power of His Holy Spirit? I want to close my message this morning by letting you hear from one of our newest members about how he encountered Jesus. His name is Tim Sears, and he and his wife Ann Marie recently joined our church. Petey Crowder is going to come and interview him. Let's welcome them this morning.

¹Source: Peter Vaglio in *America: the National Catholic Magazine*, March 17, 2014.

