

I have seen Jesus. In the spring of 2008, I was walking down 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue in Manhattan, on my way to Penn Station to return from visiting Stephanie in New York. He called out to me from the sidewalk, where he was sitting in a pile of filthy clothing and belongings. I had my headphones in and my eyes down. I replied, “Sorry, I haven’t got any,” meaning spare change. Then he started yelling at me.

That’s when I saw him. I mean actually saw him. I hadn’t even really seen a human being there, at first; just a silhouette on the sidewalk, panhandler, a nuisance, and obstacle to reaching my destination. When got agitated, I took out my headphones so I could hear what he was saying. He was angry, hurt, offended. He’d seen the cross necklace I was wearing and the Jesus patch pinned to the shoulder of my hoodie, and he’d called out, “God bless you, brother.”

To which I had replied, “Sorry, I haven’t got any.”

And then my eyes were opened, the fish scales fell away, and I beheld the Son of Man sitting on his throne in all the glory of God. It wasn’t at all like the pictures. There were no rays of light, no gold or clouds or precious gems, no glittering crown, flowing hair, peaceful complexion.

At this point, maybe you’re thinking that I’m speaking figuratively. I’m not talking about, “‘Whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me.’” I’m being completely literal. I’m talking about Jesus, in the flesh, no doubt about it. He was made known to me in the breaking of my heart.

Haven’t you ever wondered how Cleopas and his companion could walk with Jesus for seven miles without knowing who he was? What St. Luke means when he writes, “their eyes were kept from recognizing him?” I don’t, not anymore. I know exactly what he means because it’s happened to me. I saw Jesus. But only after I walked right past him sitting on the sidewalk on 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue.

I didn’t see him at first because I wasn’t looking. I wonder if the same was true for Cleopas and his friend. Jesus was dead, after all; why would they think to

find him on the road to Emmaus? How could he possibly be there? Even if he looked exactly as they remembered him, could they have known him? Or would they have shaken their heads, thinking that the grief was making them hallucinate?

Cleopas and his friend know what happened. Jesus was a mighty prophet, condemned to death and crucified. They had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel, but clearly he wasn't. Of this they appear to be certain. I wonder if that certainty might have been what kept them from seeing.

I know that was true for me. As soon as I saw that lump of clothing and cardboard on the sidewalk, I immediately knew what I was looking at and what to expect. I knew that this man was going to ask me for money, and that he was going to use it for drugs or alcohol or something that he didn't really need. I knew that he was going to accost me and that I didn't want to be accosted, so I left my headphones in, cast down my eyes, and blinded myself.

I must confess to you, my friends, that this story still makes me feel sadness, remorse, and regret. I still feel the burn of shame when I think of who I showed myself to be in that moment. Walking down that sidewalk wearing my cross necklace and my Jesus patch, though I held no hammer, I crucified Jesus so I wouldn't have to see or hear what he had to say, just like the chief priests and leaders of the people.

Peter concludes the sermon we started last week with a stark accusation: "...this Jesus whom YOU crucified." When his audience responds, Peter immediately draws that accusation into a blessing: "The promise is for YOU"—YOU who crucified Jesus. Where we might expect condemnation or vengeance or abandonment, God instead extends the promise of repentance, of the Holy Spirit, of new life.

In that moment on 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue, Jesus showed me not only himself, but the incredible love of God—love that was not going to let me walk away down that

sidewalk without observing what I had so intentionally tried to miss; love that was not going to let me go until it blessed me, changed me, called me by a new name. That experience was painful, yes, but it changed me for the better. In the moment that I saw Jesus, I, too was crucified—and I was raised up again. In that moment that I was repented. My mind was opened and my heart was reoriented, and I received life that was more abundant than it had been before, because ever since I have been looking for Jesus, waiting to see where he might appear next.

That is why I share this story with you: not to caution you against my mistake, not to strike fear into your hearts of God's judgment. Yes, the story makes me feel regret and shame and sadness, but it also fills me with joy and hope, with wonder and excitement. I share the story with you because it is a story of my own redemption.

Remember that Cleopas said they had hoped Jesus would be the one to 'redeem' Israel; I wonder what he meant by that. What were they hoping for? What did they feel Israel needed to be redeemed from? Roman occupation, perhaps? They are convinced that the actions of the chief priests and leaders of the people have obstructed and opposed what God was doing; but as Jesus walks alongside them, he opens their hearts to a new story, one in which God is actually working through the events of the last days. This idea that God can turn even evil to God's own purposes is called *redemption*.

My callousness and lack of compassion on that occasion on 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue was *redeemed* by God as that act of sin and became the means by which I died and was reborn. In the same way, the rejection and crucifixion of Jesus was redeemed when it became the incitement to repentance for the people listening to Peter's sermon. Jesus' death is redeemed by God when he is resurrected to new life. What is evil and harmful and painful does not disappear, nor is it balanced out, but God takes it and

uses it as the raw material for a new creation. The Crucified One becomes the Resurrected One, still bearing the marks of the nails in his hands.

I wonder what it is we are hoping to be saved from. What are we hoping for God to redeem? What are the promises we fear we will never see fulfilled? Maybe it's something personal, like my story: a fault or a mistake or some source of guilt. Maybe it's something big and cosmic, like climate change or war or income inequality. Whatever it is, I wonder if sometimes we might have our eyes so firmly set on the solution we wish to see that they are kept from recognizing the redemption of God walking right alongside us.

I am here to tell you on this third Sunday in the season of Easter that I have seen the risen Christ. I want to tell you this painful and embarrassing story because my shame is my glory; because in a moment when I was—maybe not at my worst, but certainly not at my best—God came to me and saved me from my “futile ways,” from a life I didn't want to be living, giving me a new one in its place. I share the story with you because Christ is risen, and I have seen him; and if he is risen, it means that our hopes are not dashed, our salvation is not thwarted, and God's promise is not lost. If he is risen, it means our redemption is at hand.

Did you notice how Cleopas' traveling companion is never named? Odd, isn't it, to learn Cleopas' name—even though he never appears anywhere else—but not the name of his friend? I wonder if that might be intentional. Or maybe, we do already know that fellow traveler's name. I know that, along with my friend Cleopas, I saw the risen Jesus in the last place I expected, on the road to Penn Station, and was changed by the experience. I would be willing to bet we all have. Maybe the missing name in the story is our own. Maybe it is Seth who travels with Cleopas to Emmaus, or...

Maybe each of us meets the risen Jesus again and again and again. The question is whether we have recognized him.