

## Talking to a Stranger<sup>1</sup>

John 21.1-14

Let's spend this sermon time pondering the fact that when Jesus came back from the dead his disciples had some difficulty recognizing him. In at least three resurrection episodes the disciples see Jesus but don't know it's him.

The Easter texts do not provide an explanation for the disciples' failure to recognize. Was Jesus somehow different? That's not unreasonable. He does seem to appear and disappear quickly during the 40 days before he ascended into heaven. His sudden disappearance from the table in Emmaus just after the disciples recognized him is a vivid illustration of some difference before and after Easter. But again, the Bible provides no explanation.

I'm thinking that the disciples' failure to recognize Jesus tells us something quite profound about having a relationship with him, namely that he never is fully familiar to us. Jesus is always at least somewhat a bit of a mystery. And that's a good thing.

The word "familiar" means literally family-like. When I first started in ministry at 26 one of our church members kept saying, "Shoot, I don't think of you as a real minister. You

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<sup>1</sup>Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on March 30, 2008 at the First Presbyterian Church, LaGrange, Georgia.

seem more like one of my kids." I'm imagining that if I was like one of her kids that she'd hardly be taking me seriously as a counselor or preacher.

If Jesus is familiar, we might be able to dismiss him more easily. "Shoot, he's just one of us. He's from around here. Just like his daddy and uncle—they all were preacher-types. Messianic tendencies just run in our family." Now, that's familiarity.

But we're contemplating the opposite—the Risen Christ is not entirely familiar. We can't pigeon-hole him. We don't know all about him. That fact is a clue to his greatness and his power over us. Part of the greatness of this life of discipleship is that it is bigger than we are. We're not going to get it right away. The Christian life doesn't simply boil down to something like being nice to people and staying out of moral trouble. Instead, we're not going to understand everything. We're not going to know ahead of time everything Jesus wishes to say to us. We're not going to understand automatically what he's calling one to do.

Some of you know that I've become freshly interested in playing the guitar. I'm learning and practicing again. Now, I've played the guitar for nearly a half century. I took

lessons for several years as a kid. I've studied music theory. I've played in little ensembles.

What's interesting is that I'm learning big principals about how guitar music is put together, which I've never even heard of before, much less learned. I'm learning certain kinds of scales that are commonplace in all contemporary music. And I never even knew they existed. It's awkward and strange to play nowadays because I'm forever thinking: "Could this be right? How've I missed all this?" Now like all players of musical instruments, I'd like to think that someday I'll be quite accomplished. But—and this is fascinating—I really don't know what being an accomplished guitarist consists of. I don't fully know how an accomplished guitarist thinks and plays.

Transfer this to the Christian life. It is our lack of familiarity of Jesus, our awkwardness, our miss understanding, our failure to recognize him that indicates his greatness. He's bigger than us—thank God. He can guide us into a life which is more wonderful than we understand. His truth is not just a variation on our little approach to life.

It has long been fascinating to me how the Christian movement continues to re-discover the depth and power of its own faith. Back in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Christians may have thought they completely grasped what Jesus came to give. The church was

powerful. Europe was Christianized. Then came a young monk named Martin Luther who essentially discovered or re-discovered that the heart of faith lay in the truth of God's acceptance of us on the basis of grace alone. How had the Christian world forgotten grace? They had and the fallout from the re-discovery of the primacy of grace changed history.

I'm thinking that our faith is so vast and wonderful, that we will never be able to embrace it all and digest it all.

I spent a number of years back in the 1990's training in pastoral counseling. Once a year our group got to spend time with a brilliant counselor and trainer of counselors—Grover Criswell. One thing he told us sticks with me. "Don't be in too big a hurry when you're working with someone to assume you've got their problem figured out. It may seem obvious to you what's going wrong with someone. Be suspicious of your surety that you get what's going on. Keep asking yourself, do I really understand what's going on with this person? Have I listened carefully to all the details? Have I jumped to conclusions? Am I imposing my hasty diagnosis on this person?"

Transfer this humility about knowing it all to the subject of this sermon. Jesus and his truth are not completely in our grasp. We don't know him as deeply as we might. Because this is so we need to learn to have the attitude of a beginner. Did

you happen to notice that the setting of our story is on the seashore? Jesus is calling fishermen. That's how he encountered some of them in the first place. In some ways, the story of discipleship is starting all over again. It's like Jesus is calling them for the first time. They're getting to know Jesus all over again!

Isn't this what it means to turn and become like little Children in order to enter the kingdom of heaven? Isn't this what it means really to listen to him and not think we know him through and through?

Consider this challenge. Say to yourself, "I don't know as much about living this Christian life as I think I do." I'm not criticizing your spirituality. I'm inviting myself first and you also to be listeners, learners, and beginners. Because that's how we get to that wonderful circumstance of wholeness and life that we will only find by following Jesus—our not entirely familiar, but risen, Lord.