



SPIRIT IN THE DESERT

John 20:19-28

### The Message

<sup>19-20</sup> Later on that day, the disciples had gathered together, but, fearful of the Jews, had locked all the doors in the house. Jesus entered, stood among them, and said, “Peace to you.” Then he showed them his hands and side.

<sup>20-21</sup> The disciples, seeing the Master with their own eyes, were awestruck. Jesus repeated his greeting: “Peace to you. Just as the father sent me, I send you.”

<sup>22-23</sup> Then he took a deep breath and breathed into them. “Receive the Holy Spirit,” he said. “If you forgive someone’s sins, they are gone for good. If you do not forgive sins, what are you going to do with them?”

<sup>24-25</sup> But Thomas, sometimes called the Twin, one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples told him, “We saw the Master.”

But he said, “Unless I see the nail holes in his hands, put my finger in the nail holes, and stick my hand in his side, I won’t believe it.”

<sup>26</sup> Eight days later, his disciples were again in the room. This time Thomas was with them. Jesus came through the locked doors, stood among them, and said, “Peace to you.”

<sup>27</sup> Then he focused his attention on Thomas. “Take your finger and examine my hands. Take your hand and stick it in my side. Do not be unbelieving. Believe.”

<sup>28</sup> Thomas said, “My Master! My God!”

<sup>29</sup> Jesus said, “So, you believe because you have seen with your own eyes. Even better blessings are in store for those who believe without seeing.”

*Grace and Peace to you from the mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.*

## Peace Shift; From Broken to Beacon

I have been reflecting on the appearances of the post-Easter Jesus. These words by Richard Rohr stirred me.

*Whenever the material and the spiritual coincide, there is the Christ. Jesus fully accepted that human-divine identity and walked it into history. Henceforth, the Christ “comes again” whenever we can see the spiritual and the material coexisting, in any moment, in any event, and in any person. All matter reveals Spirit, and Spirit needs matter to “show itself”! I believe “the Second Coming of Christ” happens whenever and wherever we allow this to be utterly true for us. This is how God continually breaks into history—even before the first Stone Age, humans stood in awe and wonder, gazing at the stars. -Richard Rohr*

I’m wondering how often I miss this experience of spiritual and material co-existing in my daily life. Maybe I’m just spiritually asleep most of the day. Thinking about my life, my body, my stuff, my happiness, and it blinds me from seeing the spiritual Jesus in the unlikely people and events of my day. Maybe I need to make a shift on how I experience God in real life.

Jesus appeared to several people after his death. Mary Magdalene was looking for the body of Jesus and found an empty tomb and a man she thought was a gardener. She made a shift on how she experienced the post-Easter Jesus.

Jesus appeared to Mary in a different way than she was used to. Mary saw Jesus as a gardener. Do I see Jesus in the landscapers? Mary had her story. What’s my story?

So, it was with Thomas as Jesus showed him his wounds. Thomas saw Jesus in his wounds. Perhaps Thomas wanted to see his wounds to be reassured the crucified Jesus and the risen Jesus co-exist in the present.

The two men on the road to Emmaus were joined by a stranger. The men saw Jesus in the body of a stranger. Do I see Jesus in strangers?

Saul of Tarsus was a Pharisee who saw God in the law. Jesus asked him on *his way*, “Saul, why are you persecuting me?” Saul had been doing work for the God he saw in religious law and in his privilege and power. Saul had a shift so dramatic that he could no longer be called Saul; his name was changed to Paul. Paul then saw Jesus in those he had persecuted.

Do I see Jesus in those I persecute for not seeing things the way I see?

When I think back on my life, I remember shifts I made that freed me. The first was a young man surrendering to a loving compassionate God who called me out of my orphaned heart.

My cultural and political views have shifted. Even my theology makes a shift dramatically when I see Jesus in my material world.

There are those who made personal dramatic shifts when faced with trials. Their shifts were not just for themselves they changed the world.

Nelson Mandela changed his position on armed resistance and violence as a means to fighting apartheid in South Africa. His shift occurred after 27 years in prison.

Mahatma Ghandi changed his position on the use of nonviolent resistance as a means of achieving social and political change. He embraced non-violent civil disobedience for challenging injustice and oppression.

Abraham Lincoln’s shift slowly evolved but shifted, nonetheless. His eventual stance against slavery in the US led to the emancipation proclamation and advocacy for the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment.

Moses made a shift after coming face to face with God in the burning bush. The face of God was not only in the burning bush, but it was also in the faces of those suffering in brutal captivity.

Matthew the tax collector did not see the face of God in Jesus alone, but also in those he ripped off. His shift caused him with great joy to repay his clients.

Heaven is seeing the face of a compassionate God in all the unlikely places.

In my early thirties I had a spiritual crisis. I was seeking answers to a theological question that disturbed me. Did I choose God or did God force me? I wanted an answer to the question of predestination.

After a year I cried Uncle. I decided to take a break from the God of the Bible and put the book on the shelf. "The Bible had been a filter for my spiritual experience. I prayed, "God Reveal yourself to me as if for the very first time without the Bible."

The next year was fairly peaceful with God as a silent partner. I was in charge. I felt more confident, and I was happier than I'd ever been.

Then late in the year of my divorce from the Bible, I went through a material crisis. Severe financial and family issues occurred that I would not wish on anyone. My emotional desperation suffocated any breath of hope.

I was a divorced dad with young daughters, and I felt like an orphan in a big people's world. I had no direction and things seemed dark to me. I did not want to give in to hopelessness. A friend told me her cousin was in town who had faced similar circumstances and may have some helpful advice. I was willing to listen to anyone or anything that might give me a reason for hope.

I drove to the Wigwam resort in Litchfield Park where this person was staying. We sat and talked, and I did not hear a word he was saying.

I could only think of my circumstances with mind numbing repetition. I heard him finishing his monologue saying, "I think I have a message for you from God. I think God is saying to let him love you." Really? I thought. That is all you got?

I left and sat in my car in the resort parking lot. I dipped into my charismatic past and prayed "God, please show me a sign that you care. That everything is going to be alright."

Staring into darkness I waited for a sign to appear. A light, an angel, a neon bird, I'd take anything. But there was nothing. I drove off thinking I am such an idiot to expect any kind of miracle.

It was midnight and I didn't want to go home. I stopped at a Waffle House. I took my Franklin Day planner in with me to look busy and not like a lonely, pathetic loser. I scribbled in it as though I had purpose.

When I went to pay, I set my planner on the register. I heard a deep, gruff voice behind me grunting, "Hey!" I turned around and there was a man with a Vietnam veterans cap sitting in a wheelchair. He was a double amputee. Tube socks covered his thighs. I said, "Yes?" and he pointed to the planner saying, "What's that?" I told him, "It's my day planner, why?" The vet said, "I thought it might be a bible. I contracted agent orange and found out I have a year to live. Wondered if it is worth waiting for." I thought this was it! This is my sign from God!

I told him I would be right back. I went home, dug through my boxes, and found my bible. I grabbed a coat. I went back to the waffle house, sat at his table, and gave him my bible, a coat (because that seemed biblical) and the only money I had.

“Sir,” I said “you have no idea what I’ve been through to get you this message. God just wants you to let him love you.” Then I said, “Now you have a message for me.” He said, “I do?” I said, “Yes, you’ve been through a lot, and you have wisdom for me right now, please tell me.”

He looked confused and under pressure to come up with something. Then Finally, he responded, “a kind word will go a long way.” I said, “aaand?” He went on with, “A kind word will go a long way, but a kind word and a gun will go a lot further.” Feeling ridiculous I said, “I’m sorry to have bothered you sir, have a good morning.” I left in worse shape for having surrendered to hope. What made me think that I was going to see a material sign?

As I was driving home, a scripture hit me right between my eyes. Jesus said, “In as much as you have done this unto the least of these, you have done it unto me.”

That double amputee, Vietnam Vet was Jesus! I had been asleep for too long. Conscious, but asleep.

Today, I don't believe that God works in mysterious ways. I believe, our mysterious God works in familiar ways; we just need to open our eyes.

Amen