

Acts 5: 27-32
Rev. 1: 4 - 8
John 20: 19 – 31
2 Easter

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“Category Crossings”

Most of us long for clear, un-mistakable signs in our lives. We don't like ambiguity, uncertainty, fuzzy logic, or any sort of in-between, not really this or that sort of thinking. We should not be surprised because we all learn to make sense of the world by dividing things into categories. It is true that those categories grow more complex over time but they are still bounded categories. Children, when they are young often call all four-legged furry animals, doggies – especially if the first example of a four-legged furry animal they met was a dog. It is only later that children learn there are animals called cats. But we still categorize things and people into mutually exclusive categories. Doing so is efficient, it helps us make some sense of the world, and it generally works well. Until it doesn't. Categorizing a hungry lion as a cute over-sized kitty is a bad idea.

As we grow, we learn that categories are less rigid and less-bounded than we think. The world turns about to be stranger than we can imagine and the world is less orderly and less neat than we would like it to be. Things and people that we thought were neatly categorized move on us. That which was black or white turns into an astonishing array of shades of color from black to white and back again. Even those things we believed were so deeply fixed as to admit no variations turn out to be more plastic and moveable than we ever knew. Even the dividing line between life and death is less clear than we generally think it is.

The post-resurrection time in our Gospels is rife with these category-bending moments. The tomb is empty, He is not here, say the angels, He is risen. Mary Magdalene meets the Risen Lord in the garden but does not recognize Him until He calls her by name. On the road to Emmaus, He is not recognized until He breaks bread with his followers. In the locked room, He shows his followers his wounds from the crucifixion but otherwise appears normal. He appears to be enfleshed – real – but he appears inside rooms without using the door. He comes and goes, appearing and disappearing, among his followers on some odd schedule that He never explains. It is all quite maddening – what sense are we to make of this resurrection? What purpose did it serve for Christ to be resurrected, only to flit around in and out of the lives of his befuddled followers and then leave them all too soon? The Risen Lord seems not to be any category at all.

We are treated to repeated stories of non-recognition followed by recognition that it really is the Risen Lord. We are treated to stories of dis-belief followed by belief. Oddly, No one ever asks Christ Jesus what it was like in heaven. No one ever asks Christ Jesus, where were you when you were dead? You would think that someone might have inquired as to whether there really is golf in heaven or whether the food there is any good. You would think that someone might have asked about the details of dying and then coming back to life. No one asks Christ Jesus if it is hard to be a human again – to experience pain, hunger, fear, exhaustion, or joy as humans do now that Christ Jesus has known life after death. His followers have no category for Him.

Because The Risen Lord has not returned to take up His earthly ministry once again. His death and burial was not some bizarre three-day weekend away from his duties. Christ Jesus returns resurrected not to continue business as usual in Galilee or Jerusalem but to make a profound theological statement and to resurrect the ministry and message that his followers will carry forward into the whole world. His resurrection appearances, odd and inconsistent as they may seem to us, are designed as teaching moments, resurrection moments for his original followers and for all of his followers all the way to this very day.

The movement from non-recognition to recognition is a movement we are called to make as modern followers. Just as his first followers did not recognize the Risen Lord, so, too, do we not recognize Christ Jesus in our lives? We so often see strangers, even enemies, in front of us when it really is the Risen Lord come to be with us. We see dangers and fears and troubles when they are marvelous opportunities to be with God in Christ and to lean in to God's grace and blessing. Like Mary Magdalene we assume we see the gardener when it is Christ Jesus in front of us. In Mary Magdalene's case, she recognized the Lord when He spoke her name. Some of us don't pay that much attention. Christ shouts at us – by name – touches us directly – and we shrug it off as silliness or Pollyanna thinking – hopelessly naïve about how the world really works – or so we say. We envy those original followers because they got to hang out with the real Jesus but we forget how often they did not recognize what Jesus was really teaching them and they failed to recognize the Risen Lord when he appeared in their midst. Our take-away is to remind ourselves that Christ Jesus is among us right now. We can encounter the Risen Lord at any time – all that matters is that we remain open to the presence of God in Christ and that it is more likely we will recognize Christ in the least and most marginalized among us and in the most unlikely moments. We all need new categories if we are to follow The Risen Lord.

Thomas reminds of us the challenge of moving from dis-belief to belief – and that is an oscillation, a category crossing, which will occur many times in our lives. For Thomas, it appears to be a one-way movement – from the time of dis-belief to the moment of full belief. But the story of the original followers is more complex than that. This charged moment in the locked upper room is insufficient to animate the followers. Other resurrection stories occur as if the followers must have repeated swings from dis-belief to belief. Finally, we know, it will take the coming of the Holy Spirit to activate the followers into taking action on their beliefs. And, even then, the followers will have times of doubt and uncertainty, times when they will question all that happened to them. The pendulum of dis-belief and belief will swing throughout their lives. And we should not be surprised that our faith swings back and forth. We, too, move from dis-belief to belief and back again. We, too, seek additional proofs, additional information, additional assurances that we are not misleading ourselves. Our world, like that of the original followers is often indifferent to our beliefs and, sometimes, openly hostile to them. These swings are our own mini-resurrections. Faith falters, spiritual disciplines grow dry and apparently lifeless; we lose heart, we lose patience; we lose our way toward God. The tombs of our longing close up again even as we pray for their re-opening. We, too, will cross categories.

But if we work to remain open to God's grace and blessing, and if we continue in the prayers, in the fellowship of other believers, and in the breaking of bread, we will keep this new life through the Risen Lord – we will see Christ Jesus – we will be renewed and restored – we will find new life in Christ. We will move again from dis-belief to belief; we will be resurrected; we will rise

again. And we will do so with our companions in faith, for most of the interactions with the Risen Lord took place in groups. Thomas was with his companions when he moved from disbelief to belief. So many of these post-resurrection stories are collective resurrection moments.

And, so, thousands of years later, we, too, gather on the first day of the week to be with the Risen Lord. We, too, share a meal; we, too, move from dis-belief to belief; we, too, have our resurrection moment; we, too, alter our categories and move boundaries of belief; we, too, are sent forth from this place to share the Good News of God in Christ with all the world; we, too, are witnesses to new signs, unwritten signs, of the Risen Lord bringing closer God's kingdom; we, too, are living signs of God's love for all creation as expressed in Christ Jesus. "Do not doubt but believe." Amen.