

April 17, 2022

**“Entertaining Angels Unaware”  
Sermon by Rev. Susan Drake**

*Genesis 18:1-8*

*God appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three figures standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, “My lords, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.” So they said, “Do as you have said.” And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.*

*John 20:11-18*

*Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?”*

*Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to God. But go to my brothers and sisters and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my God and your God.’” Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.*

*Hebrews 13:1-5*

*Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels unaware. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured... Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for God has said, “I will never leave you or forsake you.”*

## Entertaining Angels Unaware

On top of Beaver Mountain in Oklahoma there is a cemetery called Mountain Home Cemetery. I am somehow related to most everyone that is buried there. There are people I loved all my life and several generations stretching back to when Oklahoma was still called “Indian Territory”

I have fond memories of family reunions that we would have there on decoration day: picnics with our ancestors, children running and laughing, guitars and gospel music, fried chicken, and pie of course.

I can't even begin to say what I would feel if I went there and the body of one of my loved ones had been stolen. This gives us some perspective on what Mary must have felt when she came upon that empty tomb.

Imagine, after what she had been through, she stayed with Jesus all through his suffering and his final death on the cross, watching his body be brutalized. Now, one more sign of disrespect, she thinks that what remained of her beloved Jesus' body is stolen.

So she is sobbing beyond control when she encounters the two angels. This doesn't seem to surprise her, so I'm guessing they just appeared as strangers to her. After she tells them what's wrong she turns around and practically runs right smack into the gardener.

Then he says “Why are you weeping, whom are you looking for?” It turns out to be Jesus who reveals himself when he calls her by name. Everything she had lost was found again.

I am often challenged with questions by people who know that I take the bible very seriously and love the bible, but I don't read it literally or as historical fact. They ask, “Then how do you know what is true or not? Do you just get to decide that?” My answer always goes something like this:

There is a story of faith, our story of faith, that runs from Genesis to the gospels, and there are common themes, threads and patterns that emerge. Our Easter story boldly proclaims that you cannot kill God's love, you cannot destroy Jesus's message of God's unfailing love, you may try—but it will rise up again even stronger than before. Like Paul said, nothing can separate us from the Love of God through Jesus Christ. This gives me hope when it feels like all is lost.

This story with Mary takes place in a garden, just like the creation of Adam and Eve. In the beginning, there was a garden and in the new beginning, another garden. Jesus represents to us a new beginning, both in the story of our faith, and also in our own lives.

Each day, one moment at a time, we can live as people who are resurrected by God's love from the desperation of our own longing for more, from our own loneliness and isolation, from our own resentments of ourselves and others, from our own intolerance, and from our own self-centeredness.

We are renewed, forgiven, and our hearts are set free and made whole again by the in-breaking of God's grace and love. We just turn around and it is right there.

The other theme that is represented in all three of the scriptures that were read this morning tells us how to live as people of the resurrection. We welcome the stranger in our hospitality and in so doing, we welcome God.

Mary was the first to encounter Jesus as a stranger, but this theme stretches back thousands of years prior, in the story of Abraham and Sarah.

Abraham just sees the three strangers coming by the Oaks of Mamre. He doesn't know that one is God, yet he runs and tells his wife and servants excitedly, "Company is coming, let's really make them feel welcome, get out the good stuff!" In the process of welcoming the stranger, he is welcoming God, and God brings him and Sarah the good news that they are going to have a baby.

In the letter to the Hebrews we see this theme again. "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels unaware".

Mother Teresa is famous for the quote based on Jesus' teaching "whatever you do to the least of these you do to me". She said that what kept her going even through the worst of times is that when she looked into the face of someone sick or dying, she would see the face of Jesus.

Imagine what would change in the world, what a dramatic paradigm shift if we encountered every person on the planet, every stranger in the street as God. There would be no more wars or homelessness, no hunger, and certainly no racism. We would be living as Easter people, a resurrected people whose hateful and violent ways were a thing of the past.

Yet if we look around, that task seems impossible, how could we see the face of Jesus in everyone when it feels like there is so much evil and hate in the world, so much violence and brokenness? It's so hopeless, what's the point?

But when you look back at these stories, the characters in them aren't concerned about the whole world and how to solve all of its problems, their only concern is just the person right in front of them.

It is also important to note that from those strangers comes good news. For Abraham and Sarah, they are going to have a baby, and for Mary, Christ has risen.

But that's not all, as the result of these two personal encounters the entire world does change. The course of human events shifted beyond measure for from Abraham's children comes both Judaism and Islam, and from Mary's encounter with the stranger that turns out to be Jesus, Christianity is born in that moment, in the face of a stranger.

So our calling is to look to the person in front of us, whoever, that may be and see the risen Christ. Even the ones we dislike or who dislike us, even the ones that annoy us, or those we know are full of anger, those who are misguided, those who do mean things without remorse. It doesn't matter who they are, it matters who we are, and who God calls us to be.

May each day be an opportunity to feel the power of the resurrection in our own lives, to live as Easter people and to see the face of Jesus in everyone we meet. AMEN

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