

I've heard that Jesus can sneak up on people.

Mark Labberton, whom we also mentioned last week, current president of Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, had such an experience. Labberton was by no means religious. But he was very smart. And wanting to be as educated as he could be, he decided that he needed to read the Bible because much of Western culture has been shaped and informed by it. So he set off to read it cover to cover. By his own account, he had no expectations of meeting God. But as he read, he felt like these texts were different. They weren't neutral. They pointed to a reality beyond the pages, and asked for the reader's belief. And if Labberton believed, his faith would be more than an intellectual exercise. He would be giving his life over to the reality of which the pages spoke, especially to the person known as Jesus Christ. So what would it be, yes or no? Labberton said yes. Jesus sneaked up on him in the pages of scripture. And lo and behold, now Labberton is president of a theological seminary.

Does Jesus sneak up on everybody who reads the Bible like he did with Mark Labberton? No, but sometimes he does, being alive and active as he is, and dead set on bringing life to the world.

Sara Miles wasn't always a believer, either. She was a seeker of sorts, but she had a skeptical outlook on religion as reporters often do. She had worked for independent newspapers to

the left, as well as doing freelance work, covering the kind of events that make you wonder where God is. Once she settled down in San Francisco, she kept her search for God going, and eventually decided to attend an Episcopal church not far from where she lived. That Sunday like all Sundays in the Episcopal church, the Lord's Supper was served. When the priest gave the invitation to partake, Sara Miles moved toward the table, though she wasn't an official member. And when she ate the bread and drank the cup, she was overwhelmed with the experience that Jesus was present and that she was receiving him. Sara Miles still leans hard to the left. She also feeds hundreds of homeless people in a ministry at the church she now calls home. After communion, she couldn't not believe.

Does everybody who eats the Lord's Supper have Sarah Miles experience? No, but sometimes Jesus sneaks up on people at the table, being alive and available and eager to give himself to others as he is.

Jesus also sneaked up on two disciples headed to Emmaus on the evening of the first Easter, the day Christ was raised. These two disciples were sad because they hoped Jesus would set Israel free, and now he was dead. To add to their confusion, rumors were spreading that the grave where they laid him was empty, intimating that something had happened to his body. But this was hard to

believe, even if some of the women in their gang were the chief witnesses. As Cleopas and the other disciple said, the grave was empty, but nobody had seen Jesus.

We know what these two discouraged disciples were thinking not only because they were talking to themselves, but also because they were talking to a stranger. While on the road to Emmaus, someone came up beside them, and asked why the long faces. The disciples couldn't believe that this person hadn't heard what had happened in Jerusalem. So they told him the whole story, which included their own heartbreak and despair because their leader had died. You know and I know that the stranger was Jesus in cognito. But Cleopas and his friend were clueless.

They loved talking to the stranger. He had explained to them that according to the scriptures suffering and dying was on the Messiah's job description, which rewarmed their cold hearts. So when they reached their destination, they begged him to stay. That's when he took the bread and blessed it, broke it and gave it to them, just like communion, and they saw the stranger for who he was. He was alive! Jesus sneaked up on them using the scriptures (like he did for Mark Labberton) and holy communion (like he did for Sara Miles). Then he was gone. But that was enough to point Cleopas and his friend back in the direction of hope.

Jesus is not dead. He was dead, but now he is alive and won't ever be dead again. Time is his servant now instead of the other way around. So he can use it to meet us wherever he chooses, even when we are least prepared for it, even if we are on the way to Emmaus.

I had forgotten until I was reminded again this week that no one has found Emmaus. Archaeological digs haven't come up with much. You won't find Emmaus on a map. It must have been a lot like Afton. Nobody knows exactly where Afton is. Going to Emmaus was like going to nowhere, or more likely, going anywhere but Jerusalem where all the damage was done, anywhere but there. Emmaus is wherever we go to escape the unbearable world, according to Frederick Buechner, and all of us have an Emmaus to which we turn.

Emmaus may be the pills and drinks that keep us a safe distance from the pain within and the pain without. It could be the hours we spend before the screens in the evening before we go to bed. Our jobs could be Emmaus when they keep us away from family problems, or other people's problems could be Emmaus as a distraction from our own. Wherever we go to divert our attention from the heartache and despair of Jerusalem where evil prospers, no good deed goes unpunished, and Good Friday rolls around way too often. We have to get out of here, like Cleopas and his friend,

and it doesn't matter by what means we escape or exactly where we are going, just as long as we are anywhere but here.

I don't blame us for wanting to escape. But the gospel says, even if we're on the road to nowhere, Jesus knows where to find us. Full of doubt and hurting, swimming in uncertainty, that's exactly the location where Jesus comes to meet us. Jesus asks us what he asks the two troubled travelers, "What are you talking about?" Well, we're talking about our dreams that have died, our plans for our children and businesses and futures that are never going to come to pass. We're talking about how helpless we feel trying to make a real difference for others. We're talking about taking two steps forward and three steps back. We're talking about prospects for war, the mother of all bombs, and how everything changes and nothing changes. We're talking about death and all his friends hanging over our heads. Why is life so hard, even if you own a fishing boat and have a nice retirement account?

And the stranger says, "Do you not see?" What do we not see? We don't see that a power greater than death is at work in the world. We don't see that, while we all suffer the effects of sin and evil, suffering has been overcome. We don't see love as the dynamic force it is, the motor that called all things into being and the engine that will save us all. Do you not see