

Today is the seventh and final week of the Easter season. This is a time of transition in the church's calendar. On Thursday, we celebrated Ascension Day. Forty days after Easter, we remember the day when Jesus returned to heaven.

And then next Sunday is the feast of Pentecost when we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit on the disciples in Jerusalem. So, this is an in between time, the time between Jesus going away at the Ascension and returning at Pentecost by his Spirit. And in an acknowledgement of that, I'm going to mark the time between the absence of the risen Jesus and the presence of his spirit at Pentecost by extinguishing the Paschal candle.

So, we lit this candle at the Easter fire early on Easter morning, and it's burnt every Sunday in church until today. As this Easter season comes to an end, we remember Jesus withdrawing from his disciples after the resurrection, before his return at Pentecost. But before leaving the Easter season behind, I want to go back and consider the story of that very first Easter day: the story of Mary, who was the first person to actually see and meet the risen Lord Jesus, not that she knew she was meeting the risen Lord Jesus at the time. Amazingly, while standing outside of the empty tomb that first Easter morning, we're told that Mary turned around, saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. She thought that it was the gardener. And Mary was not the only one in the Easter stories who failed to recognize Jesus after his resurrection.

Rebecca preached a few weeks ago about the story of the two men who were walking on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus when Jesus drew alongside and walked with them. They too didn't recognize Jesus until he left. I think the question of why Mary didn't recognize Jesus demands further scrutiny. Seems to me that there were a number of factors at play here. Firstly, Mary had persuaded herself that Jesus's body had been stolen. This was the story, the narrative through which she interpreted all of her experience. This was the lens through which she saw what was happening around her. She didn't recognize Jesus, because the idea that he had been raised from the dead wasn't a feature of the narrative in her head. So, when the angels say to her, "Why are you weeping?" She says, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."

Because of the story that Mary told herself, the empty tomb was to her bad news. She'd gone to anoint the body of Jesus that first Easter morning after his crucifixion. She'd arrived at the grave site to find the stone rolled away. This didn't make her think hallelujah, the Lord is risen. No, instead she thought, oh no, they've stolen his body. The resurrection of Jesus just did not fit with her expectations.

There was a filter or screen, which made it impossible for her to recognize Jesus, even when he was standing in front of her. This happened throughout the course of Jesus' life. John begins his story, his gospel, by saying Jesus came to his own, and his own people did not recognize him. Their story was that the Messiah would be a Messiah, a warrior king. When Jesus didn't fit that image, that narrative, they failed to recognize him. St. Paul says, "The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus. Yet in condemning him, they fulfilled the words of the prophets."

And what was true of Bible times is true now. Voltaire said, "In the beginning, God created man in his own image. And man has been trying to repay the favor ever since." We don't recognize Jesus because he doesn't fit our story of what he should be like. We're too busy making Jesus, making God, in our own image, projecting our own version of what the divine should be like onto him.

If we're to come to an understanding of God and his ways, we need to put our stories, our view of the world, to one side and step instead into God's story. The message of the Bible is that God never fits human categories or conceptions of what God should be like.

To use a silly example, let's say I was convinced that there was intelligent life in other universes. I don't know why there should be. I've yet to be convinced there's intelligent life here on earth. But anyway, let's pretend that I was. Every time I would see a photograph of a mysterious light in the sky, I would no doubt interpret that as a spaceship. I would see it as further evidence of life outside our universe. However, if I was convinced that there was no such thing as extra-terrestrial life, as that was the narrative that I held to, when I looked at that very same photo, I wouldn't recognize the lights as a spaceship. I'd see it as a meteorological phenomenon or Chinese fighter planes.

If we're looking to recognize Jesus in our lives here, then we have to be living out a story which allows for

the reality of the resurrection. We need to put our little stories to one side and embrace a story big enough to conceive of God raising Jesus from the dead.

I think another reason that Mary might not have recognized Jesus was that he simply looked too ordinary. When she saw him, she didn't think he was an angel. So there's no sense that Jesus is shimmering in all white or radiant in any way. She mistook him for the gardener, which follows on from what I was saying last week about the resurrected body of Jesus being wounded and scarred even in his resurrected state. The down to earth prosaic nature of the resurrection stories is one of their most striking and characteristic features. Jesus ambles down a road. He makes breakfast on a beach. He's mistaken for a gardener.

We can make the same mistake as Mary. We can miss God's presence in our lives by thinking that what we are experiencing is simply just too ordinary to be an experience of the divine. I'm sure you all know the story, it's a very well-known story, of the church warden whose boat is capsized in the middle of the ocean. They're left bobbing around in a life jacket. A helicopter comes past, because he'd raised the alarms, and someone is winched down to pick up the church warden who says, "No, don't worry. Leave me. I trust in God. God will intervene to save me." So the helicopter goes away. Then another boat comes near and draws alongside. And somebody sets out to save the church warden who says the same thing. "No, I'm fine. Don't worry. I'm a Christian. God will intervene to save me." Eventually, sadly, the man drowned. And he arrives rather angry at the pearly gates and said, "God, I trusted in you. Why didn't you come to save me?" And God says, "Well, I did. I sent a helicopter. I sent a boat, but you wouldn't get in. You were too busy waiting for a miracle when I was there all the time."

God's presence in our lives doesn't have to be marked by the miraculous, or drama, or the extra ordinary. God is there present with us in the midst of our ordinary day to day lives.

Let's practice looking out for the presence of God in our lives. There's a great practice. One I found really helpful initiated by St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits. It's called The Examen. And he suggested that we take time in a day, perhaps at the end of the day, just to take a couple of minutes to look back on the course of our day, perhaps to kind of run it as a film in our imaginations. And to do that with this simple

question in mind. Where was God in my day today? And it's amazing when I've done that. When I've had that sense of something that I'd missed at the time actually being important, because God was there in the midst. So I'd commend that practice of The Examen to you.

The final and perhaps the most significant reason that we like Mary can fail to recognize Jesus is that we are dependent on God in Christ revealing himself to us. We can't work our way to God. We can never figure out how to have an encounter with the divine. God has to make himself known to us. That's the message of grace. God makes the first move.

In the story of the two men walking on the road to Emmaus, they didn't suddenly work out that it was Jesus. We're told that their eyes were opened. And notice how in their conversation it's not that Mary first recognizes Jesus and says, "Teacher." To which he replies, "Mary." It's the other way around. Jesus says, "Mary," and then Mary's eyes are opened, and she responds, "Teacher."

It is the Holy Spirit of God who first visited his people at Pentecost, who makes God known. Jesus told his disciples "When I go away from you, I cannot return, but by my spirit." It must have been hard for the disciples to understand what Jesus was saying, that he must go away before he returns to them. "It's better for you that I go away", he said, "as until I return to my father, my spirit won't return to you," he said to the disciples. And this I think is why Jesus says to Mary, "Don't touch me." Or more accurately, "Don't cling onto me." He's saying "don't cling to this form, as the form of the spirit will be better for you, and for all God's people. Then I won't be constrained by any kind of physicality. I can be with you and all God's people all the time." That's what we will be celebrating next week. The spirit of God coming to dwell with us and amongst us.

But let me leave you with one final thought. Mary, like us so often, failed to recognize Jesus. But Jesus recognized her. He saw her, and the promise of the Bible is that that's true for all of us. God sees us. He knows us. He recognizes us. He knows us by name. We read in the prophet Isaiah, "But now says the Lord, he who created you, oh Jacob, he who formed you, oh Israel, do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are mine."

The Lord is risen. He is risen indeed. Hallelujah. Amen.