

# *Sightings*

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I have had an extraordinary week. First it was a few days of vacation in the great state of Missouri, where Ben and his girlfriend Shelli live. And then there was a lightning fast trip to Atlanta, Georgia, where I met with hundreds of others from around the US and several from international locations, in the Alliance of Baptists, a relatively small group of churches and individuals who have left the Southern Baptist Convention—in many cases have been removed from the denomination—and have had to start over. It is a lively and laughter filled crowd, and, among them, it was my task to host a lively Brazilian friend, Joel Zeferino, president of another tiny group of fly by night Baptists—committed as much to human liberation and justice as any folk I know. And in the midst of all that, I met a few new remarkable friends ... and experienced grace in the presence of these good people.

I am deeply aware today, having had my cobwebs shaken loose, that each day is an adventure, each day a day when we might meet God, or taste something holy.

It is an extraordinary day today—for Christ is in the midst of us. God is guiding us on the adventure of our lifetimes. Oh, sometimes we forget—we may think of every day as just like the others. But that is not the case. We may slip into the sin of boredom, of taking things for granted. But to do so is to miss reality. Every day is a day is a day when we just might get a glimpse of the risen Christ. Every day is a day for experiencing joy, for tasting holy love. Today is an extraordinary day.

It was on another extraordinary day, long ago, that Jesus appeared among his disciples. On the evening of the first day of the week, or early in the wee hours of the second, following Jesus' death on a cross, two who had seen the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus, a village about seven miles outside Jerusalem, went racing back to Jerusalem. They arrived to find the eleven apostles, and they shared with them what had happened, how Christ had been made known to them in the simple breaking of bread. Our hearts burned within us, they told their companions. This is

how we knew with whom we had been.

Even as they all spoke, the story tells us, the resurrected Jesus appeared among them there. And in that moment, that wondrous and hard moment, when they had to deal not with second-hand reports but with Jesus himself, right there with them, the faith of the disciples turned once more to fear. They thought they were seeing a ghost. Jesus, always the good observer, noticed their terror, their distraction, and asked them what their fear was about. He said to them “Why are you troubled, and why do you question in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me and see; for a ghost doesn’t have flesh and bones as you see that I have....”

I want to share with you this story about followers of Christ from another age, who were not sure how to act, what to do, how to proceed, when they were in the presence of the risen Christ. I share it because like them we too are not sure what to do when we experience the surprising Presence of God. But I am also caught by the simple phrase “See my hands and feet.” Jesus reassured them, on that other day of wonder and uncertainty, letting his friends know that he was for real, by showing them that he was there in the flesh. Not just a spirit, surely not a ghost, but flesh and blood, body and bones!

It strikes me, as I hear this little phrase, “See my hands and feet,” that all of humankind today has a deep need to see the hands and feet of Christ. We need to see Jesus, meet him again, not as some distant ideal, not as some far-off past memory or recitation, but here and now. We need to behold his hands and his feet.

But where shall we look for the hands and feet of Christ? It isn’t an obvious question. At least if we consider where our neighbors spend a vast amount of their time searching for comfort and release it isn’t obvious.

For information on where people look for ANYthing holy, I recently turned to the obvious place. The place where we continue to spend many hours a day as a nation. Television. Now I have a confession. For some years I forgot to watch television. One year went by and then another. Honestly I didn’t miss it! But recently I have corrected the error of my ways. It was only after moving into our house at number 29 and trying to figure out how the Cable that came with our internet access, that I rediscovered the delights of late night viewing.

So...after a small amount of research—that involved hitting the remote channel changer late at night in the comfort of my home, I have made a discovery about what my neighbors are looking for.

Your Cable service is full of providers who want to sell you stuff. And so they need to know what people are looking for in order to give them what they are looking for. I soon discovered a vast variety of things people are searching for. Admittedly for a week or two before Easter, yes there were a lot in the way of old movies and (mostly) badly done research on the historical Jesus. And yes there are several TV preachers, including Joel Osteen, and others whose products I have yet to figure out, cause well, for me Joel is just too difficult for me to watch—it's not his fault, I just can't do it.

But the vast majority of folk—if the channel changer is any indication—are not watching these things. We look for what we long for in other places. We are looking for UFO's. We desperately want something transcendent and better than we are, wiser, that showed up long ago as flesh and blood. We are looking for adventure and blood and guts. We also want to look at “reality shows”—meaning loosely scripted drama by “real housewives” who suffer and struggle and fight with each other like we do —only worse--but with nicer clothes and houses. Somehow in the midst of the (not so real) “Reality” we find escape, and perhaps even hope? The list goes on and on. Music videos, old movies, stories of corruption in high places and in low.

Now some of these things are sheer entertainment. But I submit to you that we are looking for the holy in these places, hoping to glimpse something better than us, entering in to human affairs, our broken natural world. We are just looking in the wrong places.

What this big old hurting world needs, more than anything, is to meet the risen One. But I dare to believe, and I want to suggest to you, that the best way for the world to see the hands and feet of Jesus in the world is not to go virtual, but to look at ordinary Christians, doing their level best, little as we are, frail as we are, real as we are, trying to follow Jesus. Admittedly we have more and more trouble competing with the virtual reality and the half-baked ideas about Jesus and the highly entertaining stories of extraterrestrial visitors through the eons. But every now and again people really do turn off the set, and look around, and wonder, and long and hope—for something more than the (un)reality show, a power penetrating

the universe more profoundly than aliens and UFO's.

When hurting people, wondering people, longing people are looking for God, where do they look? Sometimes, at least for a moment, they look at the gatherings of his followers that meet right now, today. More often than not, one look is enough, and then they look away. But what if they were to look over here, just for a moment, and see in the church not just us ordinary little followers gathered around, but see in us, among us, through us, the hands and feet of the risen Jesus? And what is our story-line? What might they find?

Like those earliest friends of Christ, we know what it is to experience loss, to face uncertainty about the future. We know what it is to be sore afraid, while the rest of the world goes merrily on! So we understand the soul-testing situation faced by the earliest disciples, women and men suddenly deprived of their teacher by a Roman cross! We understand how as they gathered together in secret, in fear, they were shaken with fear. Unsure where to go or what to do they huddled behind locked doors.

Suddenly they were startled to see Christ standing in the midst of them, speaking to them, addressing them perhaps by name. Showing them his hands and feet. Terrified first, then seized by joy.

To convince them that he is truly alive, Jesus asked for a bite to eat. They give him some broiled fish. "And he took it and ate."

Love is in the midst of us.  
Love is flesh and blood, not just ethereal ideas  
The wind can snatch away.  
Love is a meal shared.  
Love is hands and feet scarred by struggle and unfair punishment.  
Love bears the marks of the lash  
and love says "Why are you afraid?"  
Love transforms fear into joy.  
Love just shows up in closed rooms!  
Love breaks open the hearts of the fearful.

Love is every bit as much in the midst of us. Now. Here. Today. Christ is among us, seeing how afraid we are, how uncertain, how anxious and even angry in our loss. No matter how unready we be, Love shows up.

Love can transform your fear and mine into courage. Love can break into the closed rooms of anguish and our anger. Love can bring us into one another's homes, not just our adjacent pews. Love's scarred hands can wipe away the resentment and uncertainty; Love's broken feet can carry us into the paths of hope. Love can carry us into the streets calling out for justice for those who are treated like second class citizens. Love can carry us through locked doors, and we can be for others and for one another evidence—not just sightings but encounters—the hands and feet of Jesus.

This is the simple movement, the grand movement that is at the heart of our faith. Love shows up. All unexpected, time and again, Love is at the center. And sometimes, sometimes, you and I get to be there—to glimpse it, and to offer it, bread broken, a bite shared, a hand offered, feet ready to step out in faith and justice.