
Christ in our midst
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
April 18, 2021
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on John 21:1-19

How many of us have been to the Ontario Science Centre in Toronto? How long ago did you go? Do you remember seeing - or even better using their strange camera that they had? At one time they had a machine that would take your photograph and then email it to you. But the photo you received was modified from the original to make you look much older than you were. The whole point of the machine was that your original picture would be processed through some image processing software designed to predict what you would look like when you were much older. I seem to recall that in general, if you were in your 40's or later, the "older" picture you saw was not really very different than you looked that day. You just got a few more laugh lines. But young kids in particular would get a real shock, because the "older" version often didn't look like them at all.

[image: mirror reflects a different person]

Has that ever happened to you? Have you had the experience of seeing a picture of yourself that did not look like you? If you never used that particular machine, you can perhaps get the same experience by looking at a really old picture of yourself. Because whether we look at a picture that predicts our future, or a picture from our distant past, I'm sure that all of us have had the experience of looking at a picture of ourselves and wondering, "Who is that guy?" even when our brains know that it's ourselves.

I was reminded of that machine this week, as I reflected on the biblical stories. Because in our reading from John today, the risen Jesus is consistently NOT recognized by his friends. Last week it was the same thing. Last week you may recall was the famous story about "Doubting Thomas". In that story, Jesus's friends did not recognize Jesus until they saw his hands and feet with nail holes in them. Did it strike any of us as odd that Jesus's friends did not recognize him by his face, or by his voice? And the week before that - on Easter Sunday - Jesus's friends go to the empty tomb. The resurrected Jesus is hanging around and his friends just assume he's a gardener. At resurrection,

Jesus's friends did not recognize him right away either. All of the stories of the resurrected Jesus include - as part of the story - Jesus's friends saying, "Who is that guy?" It's almost as if resurrection changes a person. It's almost as if the resurrected Jesus is not the original Jesus. If that sounds like sacrilege, please keep listening, because I hope to unpack that, and it just might be Good News for us today.

But before we go there, remind me, what is Jesus's full name? I'm sure somebody here will say, "Jesus Christ", just like you learned in Sunday School. But we all know that "Christ" is not a surname. Christ is a label, a position, like "Pope". "Christ" is taken to be the Greek equivalent of the Aramaic word "messiah". Even though Jesus was clearly not the Jewish messiah. And if that's not confusing enough why is it that we sometimes hear about "Jesus Christ" and yet in other places we hear about "Christ Jesus". What is going on?

Well in fact, I think that in the church we play a bit fast and loose about how we label Jesus. I'm sure that in some of our hymns, the hymn-writer needed to pick between the words "Jesus" and "Christ". And selected the word based on how the word sounded rather than on any in-depth theological analysis. And I don't blame them for doing that. In fact, if you sing your way through our hymn book you will probably get the impression that the words "Jesus", "Christ", "Lord", "Master", "King", "Creator" and "God" are all synonymous. I myself am not always completely consistent in how I use the words either. I generally prefer the term "Jesus" because a human being is more tangible for me than a spiritual being. So I often use the word "Jesus" even referring to post-resurrection. It would have been so much easier if Jesus had a LinkedIn account and we could just go read his profile page. For that matter, it would have been nice if Jesus had written something down himself. And if someone had taken a picture of him and shared it on Instagram. But I dream. Incidentally, here's one popular image of what Jesus may have looked like. I'm sure the olive-coloured skin is at least accurate.

[image: jesus?]

Fear not, because when we actually stop to think about how to name Jesus, it is not really that complicated. The short answer - which works most of the time - is that the word "Jesus" usually applies to the flesh and blood Jesus of Nazareth who walked around

with his friends. And the word “Christ” usually refers to the spiritual being that existed after the resurrection. Remember, the clarion call of Easter is “Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed”. Not “Jesus”, but “Christ”. And that perhaps explains why the disciples consistently failed to recognize Jesus - sorry, I mean Christ in their midst. It might also help us today as we look for Christ in our own midst. Because Christ is not simply Jesus with 3 more days of facial growth. There had to be a change. If resurrection had simply allowed the disciples to return to pre-crucifixion days, there would have been no point. Jesus had to become Christ.

So, one surprise for us is that the disciples failed to recognize Christ in their midst. But another surprise is that the disciples didn’t have to work very hard in order to recognize Christ in their midst. Recognizing Christ in their midst was not automatic. But it was not very difficult either. Because Christ was right there, hidden in their midst all along. The trick was - of course - to recognize Christ in their midst. Just like today, where the trick is - of course - to recognize Christ in our own midst.

[image: where’s waldo book]

It’s a bit like in “Where’s Waldo”. That series of books with pictures depicting scenes with lots of people, and lots of action. And we - or to be more honest, children - are invited to look within the image for a person called Waldo.

[image: waldo]

Waldo is always recognizable because he is there, always unchanged, wearing his red and white striped shirt and toque. The scenes themselves are highly varied. The next image depicts “Waldo at Wembley”. “Where’s Waldo” makes a few interesting theological points.

[image: waldo at wembley]

The first point is that when you are looking for Waldo, and perhaps you are getting frustrated because you just cannot find them, you might even start to wonder if the image is a trick. Perhaps Waldo is not actually present in the particular picture you are looking at. But trust me, Waldo is always there. It’s a book for kids after all. No matter how frustratingly hard it might be to find Waldo, Waldo is always there. Same with Christ in our midst. No matter how frustrated we might get from time to time with all the things

we think are going wrong in our lives, Christ is present. Here. Now.

The second truth is about as obvious. We get better finding Waldo with practice. And we get better recognizing Christ in our midst with practice too. My personal observation is that if you are struggling to find Christ in your midst, do not look harder, just look more frequently. We often fail to see Christ in our midst because at the moment Christ is right there, we are thinking about something else all together. Look more often and we will find Christ more often.

Another truth about “Where’s Waldo” is that once you finally find that pesky individual, you realize how easy it was. Waldo is never really hiding, Waldo is always in plain sight. Waldo is only hard to see because of the million other distractions on the page. That sounds like looking for Christ in our midst too. Christ is not hard to see, if we do not get distracted by the million other things all around us.

I think the most important theological point that Waldo makes boils down to the question the disciples had themselves. When you find someone you think might be Waldo, how do you know for sure? The red and white stripped shirt and toque might be the give-away, or perhaps his funny face. Great. So when we think we might recognize Christ in our midst, how do we know? As I said before, nobody is wearing name tags. How do we know?

[ask: how do you recognize Christ in your midst?]

I think we often fail to see Christ in our midst because we are looking for the wrong thing. Perhaps we expect a thunderous voice from the heavens. Perhaps we expect that somehow, in 2 seconds flat our lives will become perfect. If you are looking for that, well, good luck and feel free to keep looking. But for me, Christ in our midst is wonderful, but it is pretty ordinary at the same time. Christ in our midst is part of our daily lives, not some mountain-top experience. And I’m sure by now all of us have found Waldo.

[image: David Brent]

I’m reminded of the lyrics to the song, *Electricity*, written by David Brent. Who - in

referring to the expectation of something completely mind-boggling said, “I was looking up to heaven. It was right under my nose. I had traveled many light years, it was right across the road. A billion trillion grains of stardust floating round in space. Two of them collided in an ordinary place.” Looking for Christ in our midst we need to look for the wonderful and the ordinary together.

In other words, we are closer than we think. We only need to make small changes. The disciples only moved their net from one side of the boat to the other side. And then they recognized Christ in their midst.

[image: pick up limes]

To misquote Sadia Badiei who blogs under the name “Pick Up Limes”, If you want to change your life, simply change something that you do daily, so that you make the change often. It doesn’t matter how small the change is. Forget crash diets and lottery tickets that promise big change. Go big or go home is stupid. Change something that you do every day, and your life will change. So when you are looking for Christ in your midst, make small steps often.

[image: centered]

Well, I suppose I could stop here. I’m dying for a coffee. But I would feel badly if I didn’t share some clues of how to recognize Christ in our midst. Because I know that some people struggle with this, or perhaps have even given up trying. As I asked earlier, how do we know when we have found Christ? How do we recognize Christ in our midst?

The disciples recognized Christ (last week in particular) by his wounds. And looking for the divine in our midst, a good place to start is with wounds. Either our own wounds, or someone else’s. Doesn’t matter which, because our wounds connect us with real life. And that is where we find Christ. Look for pain. Then look for healing. Christ will be there. If you don’t see healing, bring it with you. If you struggle with your own pain, go find other people in worse shape than you and offer them caring and support. Christ will be there. Seek out the depressed, the disenfranchised, the lonely, the lost and share your love with them. Christ will be there. Seek out the unlovely and the unlovable and share your love with them. Christ will be there. Now, are you seriously going to tell me you don’t know anyone like that? Go downtown. Go hang around outside the main

library or Tim Hortons. You will find people who need to find the love of God. You will find people who need the love of Christ - and you can give that to them. Or start even smaller than that. Just phone people who you know might feel lonely, sad, scared, abandoned. Christ will be there too.

The easiest way to find Christ in your midst is to be Christ for others. Go. Trust me, Christ will be there long before you show up. Jesus said, "Feed my sheep". Go, and find Christ in your midst.

Amen.