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Christ in our midst  
Chapel in the Park United Church  
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Luke 24:13-35

Who here likes the Science Centre? How long ago did you last go? And what is your favourite exhibit? I have 2 favourites - long gone now I'm sure. I loved the massive full-height exhibit that you would drop ping pong balls down. The balls went through a series of logic gates - and gates and or gates. The objective was to have one ball make it to the very bottom and ring the bell. And the other favourite was - of course - the machine that said "coffee". I also remember one very strange exhibit they had. They had a machine that took your picture and then emailed it to you. I realize that today that does not sound very impressive. But this was back in the days when most people did not have mobile phones - let alone smartphones. Oh - and one more detail. The picture that you received by email had been modified. The picture you got was a prediction of what you would look like when you were really really old.

It was good for some laughs. Particularly for children. Because the pictures for older adults just looked a bit more "weathered". But the pictures for children often looked nothing at all like the present day child. Looking at your own picture - from the future as it were - many people had to say, "Who is that guy?" Even though it was a picture of themselves.

Perhaps you've had that experience. Have you ever looked at a picture of yourself and asked, "Who is that guy?" You can have this happen even if you don't see a picture of your future self. Just look at some really old pictures of yourself and I'm sure you'll know what I mean. It's a very strange feeling when we do not recognize ourselves.

I was reminded of that machine this week, as I reflected on the story from Luke. The very classic story we call "The Road to Emmaus". Because in in that story, the risen Jesus is consistently NOT recognized by his friends. And last week it was the same thing. Last week you may recall was the 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.

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Did it strike any of us as odd that Jesus's friends did not recognize Jesus 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. So 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, don't start working on your grocery list just yet, 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 we 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" but other times 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 and/or Christ. 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. Perhaps having the word fit the rhyme was more important than any christological concerns. 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" in situations where the word "Christ" might actually be more appropriate. 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 someone had taken a picture of Jesus and shared it on Instagram. But I dream.

But fear not, because when we actually stop to think about how to name Jesus, it

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is not really that complicated. The short answer - which works most of the time - is that the word “Jesus” usually refers 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 was a change. If resurrection had simply allowed Jesus and 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 really have to work very hard in order to recognize Christ in their midst either. Recognizing Christ in their midst was not automatic. But it was also not very difficult either. Because Christ was right there, hidden in their midst all along. Christ was right there - hidden in plain sight. The trick was - of course - to recognize Christ in their midst. Just like today, where the trick is - still - to recognize Christ in our own midst.

It's a bit like “Where's Waldo”. “Where's Waldo” is a series of children's books that include drawings. If you are in the sanctuary today I have provided a copy of a “Where's Waldo” scene. If you are online, just google it if you don't know what I'm talking about. Those drawings depict scenes with lots of people and lots of action. But somewhere in the scene is “Waldo”. Waldo is recognizable because he always wears the same red and white striped shirt, and a toque.

“Where's Waldo” is a fun book for children - and perhaps even for adults - because the scenes are so hectic it can be hard to find Waldo. It's a game. Every single scene contains Waldo - but you have to look for him.

Looking for Waldo raises a few interesting theological points. Because in many ways, looking for Waldo is like looking for Christ.

The first point is that when you are looking for Waldo, perhaps you find yourself getting frustrated because you just cannot find him. You might even start to wonder if the

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image is a trick. Perhaps Waldo is not actually present in the particular scene 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.

It's the same thing with Christ. 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 that we get better finding Waldo with practice. And we get better recognizing Christ in our midst with practice too. My personal suggestion is that if you are struggling to find Christ in your midst, do not look harder, just look more often. We often fail to see Christ in our midst because at that moment we are thinking about something else all together. Humans are a distracted bunch. Look for Christ more often and we will find Christ more often.

Another truth about looking for Waldo is that once we finally find that pesky individual, we realize how easy it is. Waldo is never actually hiding, Waldo is always in plain sight. Waldo is only hard to see because of the million other distractions on the page.

That is 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. We often go through life on automatic pilot and fail to see what is right in front of us.

I think the most important theological point we might learn looking for Waldo boils down to the question the disciples had themselves. When we find someone we think might be Waldo, how do we know? The red and white striped shirt and toque might be the give-away for Waldo. Or perhaps his funny face. Well, great, but what about when we are looking for Christ? When we think we might recognize Christ in our midst, how do we know? Nobody is wearing name tags. How do we know?

I think we often fail to see Christ in our midst because we are looking for the wrong things. Perhaps we expect a thunderous voice from the heavens. Perhaps we expect that somehow, in 2 seconds flat our lives will be made perfect. If you are looking for those things, well, good luck and feel free to keep looking for those things. But for me, Christ in our midst is wonderful, but at the same time it is actually pretty ordinary. A

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chance encounter on a bus? A brief but wonderful experience when you or someone else finds peace and healing? A glimmer of hope? Making a difference in another person's life? For me, Christ in our midst is something we experience as part of our normal everyday lives, not some mountain-top experience.

I'm reminded of the lyrics to the song, "Electricity", written by David Brent. The lyrics refer to the expectation of something completely amazing and mind-boggling. "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. It's like that story in John chapter 21. The risen Christ finds the disciples fishing. They had fished all night but had caught nothing. Christ told them to simply move their nets to the other side of the boat - a very small change - and right away their nets were full to bursting. We are closer than we think.

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 every day, 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, but make them often. Make those small steps part of your normal life and you will find change.

Well, I suppose I could stop here. I'd love 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?

I want to take out minds back 1 week. Because last week we had the story we call "Doubting Thomas". And in that story the disciples - and Thomas - recognized Jesus not by his face or his clothing (as with Waldo). They recognized Jesus by his wounds.

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And one way to find Christ in our midst is to look at our wounds.

We can look at other people's wounds. This means being more sensitive and figuring out what needs our community has. Many church programs started just that way. Popular examples include starting food banks, homework clubs. Perhaps creating a space where children can learn to play a musical instrument in an affordable way.

Here at Chapel in the Park, we are blessed by TNO and other agencies that deal with many community issues. But we are free to figure out what community needs exist that align with our own passions and energy.

By looking at the wounds of other people we can work to create many opportunities for Christ to be present in our midst.

We can also look at our own wounds. We all carry wounds. But none of us carry wounds that other people do not also carry. Our own personal wounds are good indicators of the wounds that other people carry. Because we are not alone.

By looking at our own wounds we can also work to create opportunities for Christ to be in our midst.

The easiest way to find Christ in your midst is to be Christ for others. Just go. Trust me, Christ will be there long before you show up. Jesus said, "Feed my sheep". Perhaps it really is that simple.

*Amen.*