Familiarity Breeds….April 16, 2017
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For reflection: I myself believe passionately in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, because in my own life I have experienced Christ not as a memory, but as a presence. So today on Easter, we gather not, as it were, to close the show with the tune “Thanks for the Memories,” but rather to reopen the show with the hymn “Jesus Christ is Risen Today.” William Sloane Coffin

Gospel Reading: John 20:1-18

Early in the morning of the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. She ran to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don’t know where they’ve put him.” Peter and the other disciple left to go to the tomb. They were running together, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and was the first to arrive at the tomb. Bending down to take a look, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he didn’t go in. Following him, Simon Peter entered the tomb and saw the linen cloths lying there. He also saw the face cloth that had been on Jesus’ head. It wasn’t with the other clothes but was folded up in its own place. Then the other disciple, the one who arrived at the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. They didn’t yet understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to the place where they were staying.

Mary stood outside near the tomb, crying. As she cried, she bent down to look into the tomb. She saw two angels dressed in white, seated where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head and one at the foot. The angels asked her, “Woman, why are you crying?”

She replied, “They have taken away my Lord, and I don’t know where they’ve put him.” As soon as she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she didn’t know it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?”

Thinking he was the gardener, she replied, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him.”

Jesus said to her, “Mary.”

She turned and said to him in Aramaic, “Rabbouni” (which means Teacher).

Jesus said to her, “Don’t hold on to me, for I haven’t yet gone up to my Father. Go to my brothers and sisters and tell them, ‘I’m going up to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

Mary Magdalene left and announced to the disciples, “I’ve seen the Lord.” Then she told them what he said to her.

Sermon: Familiarity Breeds...

It’s probably a function of the economy, but I have noticed that, particularly in the last six months or so, I am asking people, "Where do I know you from?" Or, "Don’t I know you from somewhere else?" As it turns out, I do know most of them from somewhere else—they are holding multiple part-time jobs—at the grocery, or the Y, or the other grocery, or the bank, or the place where I pick up my morning caffeine, or in the bookstore, or the place where I eat breakfast with congregants, or in the library—places I haunt with enough regularity to register the others who are also regulars. Sometimes I even register other regular patrons. As I noticed it was happening, I began paying more attention, and
pretty soon I didn’t have to ask where I knew folks from—I was familiar enough with their faces and sometimes even a little bit of their stories to realize where I regularly see them, even if they were currently out of place or if they wore uniforms, out of costume.

We all have those kinds of experiences, where we run into a familiar stranger. Their face or their voice rings a bell; we may realize instantly where we know them; or may flip through our mind’s file folders; run through the alphabet song trying to trigger name recollection; or grope in the dark until their name comes to us at 3 am.

So I am not so sure why we make such a big deal out of Mary not recognizing Jesus instantly. He was out of place and out of “costume.” Yet, to Mary’s credit, she was familiar enough with him to eventually recognize him, even though he was not only out of place and out of costume, but he was a new person with a new life and a different shape to his mission and his relationship with his disciples. She had seen him and listened to him and paid attention often enough before his death; she had watched him die so that now, when she encountered him again standing near the tomb where he had been laid, but not in it, she was familiar enough with who he was to recognize his essence. She was familiar enough with him to be sure that she had encountered the living Lord and to tell others.

Sometimes I have had the experience of not being the one trying to identify the other but being the one who is not recognized—an experience I am also sure we share.

I make a regular practice of telling hospital and nursing home patients, "It’s Linda from church." I am out of place and out of costume and they may be heavily medicated. I don’t take it amiss if they look at me with a bit of confusion when I arrive and I always leave a card.

There was another occasion when I didn’t take it amiss, although I certainly found it embarrassing when someone didn’t recognize me right away. I had been at my church in Cincinnati for a few weeks and was grocery shopping. Someone looked at me with a little intensity as they passed me. They got all the way to the other end of the aisle, turned and yelled across the store, "I know you. You are our new pastor. I didn't recognize you with your clothes on." They obviously meant without my robe—not that any of the other startled shoppers would have known that. Given the church had 1600 members, to this day I have no idea who that was—but he had clearly been a church regular—already familiar enough with me in that few weeks to recognize me out of place and out of costume.

It was a different experience than when I had been here about a year. I was checking some books out of the library and when I handed over my library card, the person behind the desk said, "You are our new pastor." There was no face recognition. They did however recognize my name on the card. They had not yet seen me in place and in costume. I couldn't tell you who that person was either because I had obviously never seen him or her before. I don't get offended on such occasions. I am often amused and they provide a reality check about what we do and who we are.

Recognition of a person or an idea or a teaching requires familiarity – exposure. We are all familiar with the phrase "Familiarity breeds contempt"—the idea that the better we know something or someone, and therefore are able to see its imperfections, the less respect we hold. It may also mean that the more familiar we are with someone or something, the less appreciation we have for what we have come to expect and take it or them for granted. One of the reasons we put thanks in the bulletin every week is to remind us of what it takes to make church happen, the traditions we cherish and the new things that can open our eyes to wonder.

But if we focus on the negatives of familiarity, then we miss the great riches familiarity can bring to our life and faith. Mary’s experience calls for an Easter familiarity. Easter familiarity calls for, among other things, engagement in the life of the church and knowing enough of the stories of our faith that they resonate in our memories when we hear them again. Easter familiarity can sharpen our attention to all that happens in our lives in our workplaces, in our classrooms, in the world, so that, like Mary, we too can see the living Lord in our midst, who can and does come to us all the time out of place and out of costume.
An Easter familiarity with the stories and ministry of our Lord can open our eyes to the work of Christ in the world—the therapist working with the special needs child; the person providing meals at a shelter or delivering food to a pantry; the ones who travel the world working for peace or digging wells for clean water. Hardly any of the ones doing those things will be wearing robes and traveling barefoot or be called Jesus, but Easter familiarity means seeing those people and activities will call Jesus to mind. Easter familiarity breeds remembrance. With practice, the cycle will strengthen so that we will see Jesus in those works almost automatically. Easter familiarity breeds recognition. As the cycle strengthens even more, the more we see Christ, remember his ministry and see it again in the world, the more discouragement will be overcome and hope will grow. Easter familiarity breeds hope.

Familiarity with the stories and the ministry and teachings of the Lord will also remind us that we are not merely his disciples in this place, on Easter or any other Sunday, but we are his disciples when we are in the neighborhood, in the classroom in the work place – when we are out of place and out of costume. That Easter familiarity can sharpen our hearing and listening. Then, when someone calls our name, like Mary, we can hear too Jesus' voice in the call – the call to pay attention, to respond, to serve in his name. Easter familiarity breeds discipleship. And, even though few if any of us will do our work in bathrobes and bare feet or be named Jesus, as our tending to the cries of the world increases, as the cycle strengthens linking sight and sound to memory and ministry, we, as his disciples become bearers of hope in the world. Easter familiarity breeds hope.

In his book, *A Room Called Remember*, Presbyterian preacher, pastor and author Frederick Buechner wrote some words I'd like to read, but as I do I would like each one of us to close our eyes and hear Jesus speaking them directly to us:

"When you remember me, it means that you have carried something of who I am with you, that I have left some mark of who I am on who you are. It means that you can summon me back to your mind even though countless years and miles may stand between us. It means that when we meet again, you will know me. It means that even after I die, you can still see my face and hear my voice and speak to me in your heart."

... An Easter familiarity with the words, the call the teachings of Christ means that he has indeed left his mark on us and our ministry and that through us, his disciples, we become the bearers of his hope in the world. May it be so for us today and in the year ahead.