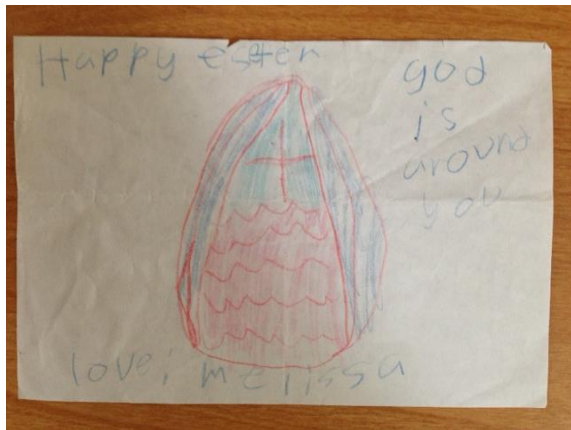


Oftentimes, as I am standing at the back of the church greeting people after the service on Sunday morning, someone will slip me an envelope or a piece of paper on which they have written me a note. I want to tell you how much I appreciate those little gestures, because – as many of you have come to discover – if you simply tell me something after church with the expectation that I will remember it for more than the next 30 seconds, you will regularly find yourself greatly disappointed. Sometimes I am handed an article or cartoon cut from a newspaper or magazine alluding to some story I've told or comment I've made somewhere along the line. Other times it is a note, often scrawled on the back of a bulletin or on whatever piece of paper someone might find handy at the last minute, with a request for prayers, or a reminder about an upcoming meeting, or a change of address. Then, when I get back to my office after church, I can more thoughtfully go through those messages, sometimes dash off an email or two, and then be done with that piece of business.

Every once in a while, though, instead of just getting a piece of transitory news or business to attend to, I receive instead a gift... a present. And some of those after-church communications continue to stay with me long into the future.

And that is precisely what happened to me a couple of years ago now, on an Easter Sunday, as I was handed a present which I still treasure. It was given to me by one of the, let's just say, "shorter" members of the congregation that day... someone who could still proudly count their age using a single digit. And this is what I was given.



I know it's difficult to see, but it contains a lovely picture in the center drawn with colored pencils, which appears to be sort of "egg shaped" (perhaps it is an Easter egg, or maybe it's an empty tomb), with a cross in the middle and some wavy lines at the bottom. Across the top of the picture it reads, "Happy Easter (spelled "eseter"). And then on the bottom it says, "Love: Melissa." But what really caught my attention were the four words this young person added to the side of the picture. It says, simply, "God is around you."

I thought to myself, as I came across this little gift recently, "What a lovely reminder, especially as we look back only a little more than two weeks now to our Holy Week time, as we experienced in such a tangible and visceral way what it is like to come face-to-face with God's absence in our lives." Four simple words from a child: "God is around you." And yet, despite its apparent simplicity, it is something which many of us either don't know, or don't remember, or don't wish to be reminded of in our lives.

Some of you may have watched the wonderful B.B.C. comedy series which ran for over 10 years about church life in England called *The Vicar of Dibley*. For those of you who haven't had the pleasure, it is a delightful, very British tale of a rural village in the English countryside as seen through the life of the vicar of the local Anglican

Church, named Geraldine Granger. For those of you who have seen *The Vicar of Dibley*, let me remind you that it is a totally fanciful notion of church life, which is totally unsustainable – at least in the U.S. – in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Without meaning to spoil too much of the storyline for those who might still see it someday, the series concludes with the last couple of episodes, when the vicar finally falls in love and gets married to the good-looking stranger who is new to the village.

On their very first date, these two soon-to-be-lovebirds are having dinner in a local restaurant. The vicar, however, is concerned that the new guy in town may be a little put off by the fact that she’s the church vicar... so she conveniently fails to tell him that one little detail about her life story. In the course of their dinner, he tells her how he had once dated a seminarian, but how it hadn’t worked out well. “Whenever I was with her,” he tells his date, “it felt like God was watching.” And when I saw that episode, I thought to myself – following the theology of my young friend who gave me the Easter picture – “Well, of course God is watching! What would anyone think anything differently?”

In this morning’s gospel lesson, we find ourselves – for the 3d week in a row now – with the disciples on Easter Sunday. Two weeks ago, we were with Mary Magdalene and the other Mary as they discovered an empty tomb. And last week, it was Jesus appearing to his disciples behind locked doors in an upstairs room. Today, meanwhile, we hear the story of two more of Jesus’ companions walking along the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus, about 7 miles away, late in the afternoon. As they walked along, Cleopas and his fellow travel were discussing all that had gone on the last few days, from Jesus arrest until his execution. And they were discussing, as well, the events of the past few hours, as reports were filtering out that his tomb was found empty.

Suddenly, a visitor meets them on the road, and joins in their conversation. Perhaps it is just a chance encounter. Or perhaps... it is something more. Because the author of today's gospel tells us – the listeners – we know something that Cleopas and his companion do not. We know the true identity of this new stranger on the road.

And yet, like so many of us, they didn't recognize the presence of the divine in their midst. Maybe, we may argue, Jesus was wearing some kind of a disguise, so they couldn't tell who he was. Or maybe they were so grief-stricken that they weren't even aware of who was walking beside them. Or maybe they were so caught up in their own little world that they didn't even have a sense of the world right next to them. Or maybe it's as simple as the notion that they simply couldn't believe that God could be so close... that Jesus could be so present in their lives... that Love – Perfect Love – could be just a breath away. And I wonder, “What are those moments in my life when I've unknowingly met Jesus, who was standing right beside me the whole time?”

I was raised always believing that God was somewhere a long way off, sitting on a throne somewhere high above the clouds. As a kid, it was actually a fairly easy and logical 4-step process which led me to that conclusion. It goes like this:

1. I used to have a tee-shirt which read: “If you lead a good life, say your prayers, and go to church, when you die, you'll go to... On the shirt it said, “Montana.” Of course, the inference is that Montana is a lot like heaven (which, by the way, is absolutely true.)
2. And where is heaven? I didn't know for sure, but I was told that it was the place where dead people went, and that they could somehow look down from there and see me. So, I surmised, wherever it was, heaven had to be somewhere a long way from here... somewhere “up there.”

3. And what is the opening line of the Lord Prayer which we all say so faithfully each Sunday morning? “Our Father, who art in heaven.”
4. So there you have it... God is in heaven, which –wherever it is – is a long way from where I am.

We may smile at the naïveté of that notion nowadays, but in many ways, for lots of us our basic understanding of our relationship with God hasn't changed all that much. Whether God is in heaven, or tucked away in the corner of some church somewhere, or embodied in somebody way more holy than I am... so long as God is somewhere that I am not, then my life and God's life only have to bump into one another on rare occasions... usually when it fits my schedule, or when I have some pressing need that demands divine intervention.

But imagine for just a moment, in the words of that wonderful song by Joan Osborne, “What if God was one of us?” Imagine, as Cleopas and his companion were soon to discover, that Jesus might be a fellow traveler with you on the road of life.

Each of us is here at All Saints this morning for some reason... especially when there are so many other options for how to spend a lovely Sunday morning in May. What is it that brought you to this place today? One person might say, “Well, I come to church for the music.” Another might say, “I come to hear those great Bible stories.” Still others might say, “I come for communion... or I come for the fellowship.” A few might even say, “I come for the sermon.” I wonder what life would look like, however, if all of us said, “I come so that I can meet Jesus.”

I'd like you to try something this morning... something which may well move you out of your own comfort zone... which, I understand, is always a dangerous thing to do in church. Receiving communion in the Episcopal Church in general – and certainly this is also the case here at All Saints – is regularly understood to be some kind of private, personal "me and Jesus" moment, where people often approach the altar rail with heads down, and eyes averted, and hands discretely held out. If that is your normal routine, I would like to offer you an alternative way to approach that experience this morning.

At the end of this morning's gospel, as Jesus sat at the dining room table in the home of Cleopas and his companion, as the scriptures tell us, "he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him."

The trick is not just to find the Risen Christ in the communion bread, but because of that communion bread, to find the Risen Christ in the person next to you as you share in that sacred meal. So pay attention, this morning, as you come forward to communion, not only to the bread and the wine, to your own hands outstretched, but to those around you, standing or kneeling on either side of you, those directly across from you. Look into their faces. Look into their hearts. And see the face of the Risen Christ in them.

Some might say that the note once handed to me was little more than a child's doodling during church on a Sunday morning. But I know better. I know it's a gift. I know it's a sign. I know it's the truth.

"Happy Easter... God is around you." Amen.