

“WHO IS THIS STRANGER?”
Imagine Meeting Christ Series #7
Acts 2:1-21, Luke 24:13-35
May 22 & 23, 2021 - Pentecost Sunday

When we start a new relationship with someone, there are initial steps that take place; noticing each other, talking with each other, listening to one another, touching one another in loving ways that draw you closer to each other. You spend time with one another, seeing each other as often as you can. Your interest in that other person begins to excite you and makes you want to grow deeper in your relationship, to the point that you share all that you are with that other person.

A relationship with Jesus works the very same way. In this series “Imagine Meeting Christ,” we’ve been looking at beginning and developing a relationship with Jesus Christ. We’ve looked at how Jesus notices us and looks right at us to get acquainted with us. We’ve seen the value of Jesus’ touch in our lives, bringing healing and new life. We’ve heard about how Jesus listens to us and then answers us in ways that surprise us. We have learned how Jesus teaches us about the Kingdom of God so that we might change our ways to follow Him. We’ve heard some of His wonderful stories and parables that open our eyes to seeing our lives in different ways. And we’ve come to experience the marvelous power of His majesty as the Son of God. These are certainly important things that help us begin to get to know Jesus so that we can let Him become our friend.

But “Christ doesn’t expect your relationship with Him to remain in the “getting-acquainted” stage. In fact, something’s wrong if you see Jesus only as a teacher you respect or a miracle worker you admire.

“With some people you find that after you’ve become well acquainted, you can only go so far. Only so much of the person’s qualities or goals interest you, or your friend has blocked you from going deeper and discovering more (about them).

“You won’t find your friend Jesus that way on either count. He wants you to know Him more deeply. He wants to walk with you for long periods of time so you can see more of His substance...and so He can know you better.

“He wants to include you in His discipleship training”¹ to take you a deeper level of friendship, so that when you come into those tough times in your life, you can turn to Him and trust in Him to be with you. As you walk with Jesus, He allows you to learn more of how He dealt with those same things, giving you an opportunity to follow His example. And as you continue to grow closer with Jesus, you find greater confidence in dealing with those tough situations, bringing about greater results.

Yet, healthy relationships demand that there is give and take for both sides. It’s not just one person sharing their deepest desires and yearnings, with the other one just listening. It is a two way conversation that opens up on both sides, to go deeper, so that both parties are impacted in the midst of that relationship.

Jesus wants you to come to know Him very deeply, AND He wants you to trust Him enough to share your greatest worries, your fears, your hurts, and even your dreams with Him. Jesus is interested in the relationship between you being so open that you easily turn to Him for guidance and direction, for assistance and support, and even for new possibilities and new directions for your life, more than anyone else. That’s what best of friends do for one another.

The relationship Jesus wants with you is not one that stays politely on the surface, dealing only with the inconsequential areas of life, but one that will stretch you and challenge you. He wants you to become completely transparent with Him, as much as He is transparent with you. He wants you to see Him for who He really is, as much He sees you for who you really are. It demands that you open up completely to Jesus, letting all the warts show, all the deficiencies become exposed, and all the failures become fully evident. It’s not to make you look bad, or make you feel stupid or small, but to offer you much more than you thought was possible, even through the warts and deficiencies and failures. Jesus wants you to be completely open with Him so that nothing is hidden from Him, or from you.

Jesus demonstrated the depth of a relationship in the way that He dealt with the disciples. After getting acquainted with them, “He called them to leave their nets. He beckoned Peter out onto the

¹ (Robert Rasmussen, *Imagine Meeting Him*, [Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 1998] pg. 90)

waves. He pushed the boundaries of their faith, (telling them) ‘*You feed the thousands!*’² He sent them out on their own to tell others that the kingdom of God was at hand through Him.

You see, Jesus wants us to grow in our relationship with Him so that we don’t worry how He will respond to our struggles and inadequacies. He loves us and wants to grow our relationship closer. Yet certainly questions will arise in our minds as we begin to grow deeper in our faith in Him. Can we trust that He will forgive us when we sin, will He console us when we doubt, will He encourage us when we lose hope, and will He lift us up when we fall? Jesus wants us to trust Him, even as we are, knowing that He loves us and desires the very best for us.

And as we grow closer to Jesus, we need to begin to look at the expectations that we have toward one another. Can we expect Jesus to be with us in every situation we find ourselves in? Can we expect Jesus to give us the courage to stand up to wrong so that we might do what is right? Can we expect Jesus to call us to live differently than we have been in order to live as His witnesses? Can Jesus expect us to change our ways so that others might see Him through us? We’re not playing “friends” here, but letting our walk with Jesus take us to new levels of faith and commitment to Him. As we meet Jesus, we are invited from being casual friends with Him, to grow in our relationship so that He can lead us as His disciples toward usefulness in fulfilling the task of bringing Salvation to the world through Him.

That demands deeper companionship with Jesus. He wants you to grow so close to Him that nothing in this world could convince you to walk away from Him. He wants you to be so committed to Him that no matter what path your life takes, you are willing to follow His lead, live according to His commands, and tell others about Him. Even the tough roads will draw you closer to Him as you trust in Him and walk with Him.

But walking with Jesus can become tiring. There will be times when we will want to turn back and enjoy a less involved acquaintance with Jesus, where there will be less conflict and fewer challenges. And some will choose to distance themselves from Jesus, having liked what they heard from

² (Rasmussen, *Imagine Meeting Him*, pg. 91)

Jesus initially, but not willing to let the tougher teachings of Jesus change their lives or convince them to keep following Him.

The hope is, however, that we all commit ourselves to following Jesus, no matter how tough it gets, or how difficult Jesus' teachings become. We have to remember that Jesus is God with us, desiring our very best, and if we keep walking with Him, He will lead us to wonderful new heights in our relationship with Him, and He will use us in marvelous ways to touch the lives of many around us. But it demands that we keep walking with Jesus and developing our relationship with Him. It demands our ultimate commitment to Him so that nothing else in all this world means more to us than Jesus does. It means that no matter what happens, we hold on dearly to our relationship with Him. We are invited to walk the path of life with Jesus, and stay with Him no matter what, knowing that He will always be with us and love us.

“Africa...teaches a lot about paths. Nothing profound, but [extremely] helpful [here] in this context. **First**, paths take time to walk. You don't quickly reach the end. **Second**, completing a path usually requires many little steps. But the steps add up, and in time you find, looking back, that you've made fairly significant progress. And **third**, if you stop before a path ends, there's a good chance you're in the middle of nowhere. In Africa, even a child knows these truths.”³

And it's exactly what the disciples found in their lives, too. Listen to how Jesus encouraged a couple of them to keep walking the path with Him. This is Luke 24:13-35. (READ Luke 24:13-35)

Cleopas and his friend were in a tough situation. They had come to know Jesus and they had come to believe that He was a prophet of God. They hoped that He was the Messiah who would redeem Israel and set them free from the occupation of the Romans. However, when Jesus died on the cross, all of their hopes and dreams died with Him. But they were conflicted because they had heard the report of the women and of Peter and John who had gone to the tomb and seen it empty. And more than that, the women said that they had seen Jesus, Himself, risen from the dead! It was such amazing and

³ (Rasmussen, *Imagine Meeting Him*, pg. 92)

unbelievable news that they just didn't know what to believe. They were so hopeful, but no one had ever risen from the dead before. How could it possibly be true?

But Jesus saw their uncertainty. He understood their plight. He recognized their unbelief. So He joined them and walked with them that whole day, explaining the Scriptures (what we call the Old Testament), and laying out God's plan of Salvation for the world through the Messiah's death and resurrection. He taught them about the need for the suffering to occur to pay for the punishment of the sins of the people. Jesus told them all about the work He had been doing, fulfilling the prophecies of Moses and the prophets. Jesus helped them to understand all of the things that He had been doing, but they were kept from recognizing Him.

Their hearts were strangely warmed by the teachings of this Stranger. His understanding of the Scriptures helped them to see through their doubt and come to know God's plan completely. They were encouraged and challenged to keep walking in their faith in Jesus, even to the point of believing that He had risen from the dead. And at the end of the day, as Jesus made like He was going to keep on walking, these two invited Him to remain with them for supper. And it was there, at the supper table, that they suddenly realized who the Stranger was – It was Jesus, Himself, risen from the grave, right there in front of them!

However, as soon as they see Jesus as the Stranger who walked with them, He is gone. Now, they could have decided that it was certainly a great day spent with the Lord, but Jesus was gone again, so that was that. They could have let Jesus go and continued on their way, even with a new hope of the restoration of Israel. They could have decided to stop right there in the path, since Jesus was no longer with them. But where would that have left them? In the middle of nowhere!

Their encounter with Jesus challenged them to either let their faith in Jesus go away and let Him be dead and gone forever, or to let their faith go deeper, putting feet to their faith. They decided to go deeper, not only for themselves, but also for the other believers who were still in Jerusalem. Their quick trek back to join the others began to expand their faith, but who would believe them? The others would

think that they were out of their minds, hallucinating through their grief over Jesus' death. Would they dare to share their experience? Would they dare the possible ridicule from the other followers of Jesus?

It's the questions we struggle with as Jesus shows up in our own lives today. He appears in our life, delivering us from the grief or hurt or pain or medical condition, and we gain hope in Him. But to share it with others? To become so vulnerable as to share our experience is that next step in our journey of faith in Jesus. He challenges us to become witnesses of what He has done in us, telling others of His great love for us so that they might draw near to Him as well.

So these two make a quick return to Jerusalem. They take the risk of rejection and belittlement as they share what happened to them. And fortunately theirs' was not the only encounter that had happened – Simon Peter had also seen the Lord Jesus. So these two now joined the path of faith with the others.

And then, Jesus appears in their midst. They may not have been as terrified as the others were, but it still took them by surprise. Yet, they had seen the risen Christ, Jesus, already, so it would not have been as overwhelming to them as to the others. They had taken their next steps of faith with Jesus and were joined by all of the followers of Jesus. They were safe to share their experience with others because they were in the room with other believers. But could they dare begin to share with others who were not a part of their group that Jesus was alive? That would be the next step along the path of faith.

And that's where we find them in our lesson from Acts 2 (1-21). At that point it was Pentecost, 50 days after the resurrection of Jesus, the same day that we celebrate today. The Apostles had been present when Jesus ascended back into heaven. Now these men and women were together under the leadership of the Apostles. They had been praying, preparing for the promised Holy Spirit, whom Jesus said He would send to them to empower them and enable them to become the great witnesses for Jesus to every tribe and nation of the world.

Up to that point the believers were still quite shy about their faith as they were working only on human strength, power, and wisdom. But once they gave in to the guiding of the Holy Spirit, these men

and women boldly shared the Good News of what God had done to bring freedom to Israel. It may not have been the freeing of the nation from the occupation of the Romans, as many were hoping for and expecting from the Messiah, but it was a greater freedom that would transform the lives of all those who lifted up Jesus as God's Promised Messiah. He saves all people from their sins and brings those who believe in Him out of death into eternal life.

With the power of the Holy Spirit in them, these men and women continued their walk down the path of faith with Jesus. They didn't let their fear hold them back. They didn't stop out in the middle of nowhere half way to their destination. Instead, they let the Holy Spirit work through them to reach out to all the people in Jerusalem, speaking to at least 15 different ethnic groups who had heard the howling sound of the wind that the Holy Spirit made when He had come upon them.

And just like Cleopas and his friend asked of Jesus, the people in Jerusalem asked the same question, "Who are these strangers?" They were all Galileans in Jerusalem, but each one was speaking a different language as the Spirit gave them the ability. They were speaking in tongues and languages of all of the people so that they all could hear and understand the Good News of Salvation in their own heart-language. There was no fear in them. And even when they were accused of being drunk with wine, Peter explains to everyone that it wasn't wine that they were drunk with. It was the Holy Spirit moving in the lives of all these believers of Jesus.

So how do uneducated Galileans suddenly become proficient in the languages of so many nations around the Mediterranean Sea? It was their next little step along their path of faith with Jesus, opening up their lives to be used by the Holy Spirit to speak in a language they did not know in order to tell people they didn't know about the love of God at work through Jesus. They were able to witness all the good things that Jesus did for us so that the people could hear about His death and resurrection for the payment of sin for those who believe in Him. That was another reason that people claimed they were drunk with wine, since the dead don't usually rise from the dead. Only a drunk would come up with such wild stories.

But Jesus promised that when the Holy Spirit comes, we would be empowered to do great things. He said in John 14:26, “*The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and remind you of all that I said to you.*” So we will be able to share all of the teachings of Jesus as the Holy Spirit teaches us about them and reminding us of them. Then, in Acts 1:8, Jesus tells us, “*But when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be filled with power, and you will be witnesses for Me in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*” The Holy Spirit gives us the courage and the strength to be the bold witnesses for Him.

So we don’t need to be highly educated in theology to be a good witness of Jesus. We only need to be faithful followers of Jesus, willing to grow deeper in our relationship with Him and walk with Him every day of our life. As we walk with Jesus as our Savior, the Holy Spirit can use us and empower us to do many things for the work of the church and for the glory of God in the lives of those who do not yet believe. We are given gifts of the Holy Spirit to do the same work that the disciples did in Jerusalem on that first Pentecost, and throughout the rest of their lives.

In I Corinthians 12:7-11, the Apostle Paul tells us about the gifts of the Holy Spirit given to those who walk with Christ Jesus, and follow in His ways. He says, “*But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.* ⁸ *For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit; ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰ and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues.* ¹¹ *But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills.*” He empowers us with gifts to do the work of the Lord. Jesus does not want to be a stranger to us, but invites us to get to know Him, not only as an acquaintance, but as a deep, personal friend and companion. That only happens as we decide to walk closely with Him, and be willing to follow Him, and let Him lead us deeper in our walk with Him. We must decide to walk with Jesus so that He can lead us to greater things.

So, will you let Jesus become your friend? Will you decide today to walk with Him so that you might be His witness to those around you? Let the Holy Spirit be at work in you to do great things for the Lord Jesus.

Let's pray. Father, thank you for allowing us to know Jesus. Give us the courage to walk with Him so that we might become bold in our own faith, for we live in a world that so desperately needs to know Him. Open our eyes and ears to see Him with us and listen to His still, small voice speaking to us the truths from You. Then, empower us to live boldly for you, letting Your Holy Spirit fill us and work through us to help others begin their own journey of faith with Jesus. This we pray in Jesus' holy Name. AMEN.