

“Expectations”

A sermon on John 20:19-31

Nancy Raca, April 23, 2017, Covenant United Methodist Church

[Monkey Business Illusion video – see YouTube]

So, how did you do? Did you see the gorilla? How about the curtain changing color, or the person in black leaving the game?

I first saw this video years ago, and I confess that I missed the gorilla. But even when I went back to look for this video this week, and I knew the gorilla was there, I missed the person leaving the game and the curtain changing color. As the video said, about half of the people watching this video for the first time miss the gorilla.

And that seems weird, right? Because how can you miss a *gorilla*? But it turns out that when you are watching the people in white and counting the passes, you kind of tune out everything else.

This phenomenon is called inattentional blindness (not unintentional, but inattentional). Inattentional blindness is the failure to notice a fully visible but unexpected object or event when you are focusing your attention on something else.

This experience is a subject of some interest in the scientific and psychology communities. Today, I’m going to make the case that it’s of interest in the Christian community as well. In fact, I’m going to argue that it makes *all* the difference in how we live as Christians in our world. Because we are guided not by what’s actually in front of us, but by our *expectations*.

Ok, so, in exploring the theme of Christian inattentional blindness, let's turn first to the Bible. Before we get to the Gospel reading today, let's revisit something we heard last week. Last week, on Easter, our Scripture was the one directly preceding today's passage, the one about Mary Magdalene going to the tomb. As we know, Mary meets the risen Christ there, but not before becoming somewhat alarmed that Jesus' body is missing from the tomb. Even as she's crying, she turns around and, John tells us, she "saw Jesus standing there, but she didn't know it was Jesus." And then, incredibly, the Scripture tells us, "Thinking he was the gardener," she spoke to him. *Thinking he was the gardener??* How on Earth could Mary Magdalene, who had known Jesus, her dear friend, for years, mistake *Jesus* for the gardener?

Could it be that Mary was suffering from inattentional blindness? Just as some of you missed the gorilla in the video here, maybe Mary was so focused on other things – her grief or her panic over the apparent desecration of Jesus' grave – that she *couldn't* see what was right in front of her. She couldn't see that Jesus was *alive*. She didn't *expect* to see Jesus, so she didn't.

Now let's look at the disciples in today's Gospel. You will recall that the disciples were holed up in a locked room, afraid for their lives. Their leader and friend had just been put to a horrible, public death. But Jesus somehow enters unseen into this locked room in order to come among them. It's not until Jesus gets right up in their faces and shows them his scarred hands and side that the disciples "see" him and *then* they are filled with joy. Once again, they are not *expecting* to see Jesus. They are expecting the Jewish authorities to come beating down the door. They are expecting

to be arrested. They are expecting to have to figure out what to do with themselves now that their leader is gone. But they are not *expecting* Jesus.

Next week, we will hear about a couple of disciples on the way to a place called Emmaus. Once again, Jesus will walk right up to them and they won't recognize him. (But I'll leave that story for Pastor Ann...)

Eventually, of course, Jesus' disciples encounter the risen Christ. They *know* that Jesus is with them. But as time goes by, after Jesus has ascended into Heaven, and the church grows and Christianity spreads around the Mediterranean, the promise of the risen Christ takes on a different sort of meaning.

In the early church, in the first couple hundred years after Christ, people expected to see Jesus, but they expected it as the Second Coming. The people of the early church believed that Jesus was coming back, and it was going to happen *any minute*. This is clear in the writings of Paul and John in the books of the Bible that follow the Gospels. 1 John 2:18 says "Children, it is the last hour." The *last* hour. Like, *now*. These early Christians expected to see Jesus come back in a blaze of glory in the immediate future.

Today, especially in the mainline Protestant church, most of us don't expect the Second Coming today, or tomorrow, or maybe even in our lifetimes. We do not expect to see Jesus come out of the clouds accompanied by trumpets and angels. Since we've been waiting 2,000 years for Jesus to return, we've lost the immediacy of expecting such a dramatic, world-changing event.

But, it seems to me, not only are we *not* expecting an imminent Second Coming, we also have fallen into the trap that caught Mary Magdalene, and the disciples in their locked room, and the travelers on the Emmaus road: we have stopped expecting to see Jesus altogether. We have forgotten to look for him. We have forgotten – already! – what we experienced just last week: That Jesus is *alive!* Jesus. Is. Alive.

We are the victims of our own inattentional blindness. We have become so focused on our own problems, our own achievements, our own wants and needs that we are missing Jesus! We are guided by our expectations, and we don't *expect* to see Jesus.

What do *you* expect when you go out into the world? When you go to work or to school or to a party or a family event? You might expect to be productive – to get stuff done to meet your deadlines or your goals of a good grade. You might expect to be bored – to have to talk to people who drone on or who frustrate you. You might expect to have a good time – to escape your problems for a while, maybe with a drink or a big piece of chocolate cake. What do you expect when you turn on the TV? Do you expect to see a lot of bad news, conflict in the world, sex and violence? Do you expect to laugh at a silly comedy? What do you expect when you ride the bus, or go to the grocery store? Do you expect to stand in line, to rub up against people you might not normally talk to? Do you hope to get your business done there as soon as possible and get out?

Friends, these are examples of how many of us have set our expectations around *earthly* things and *human* actions. These are examples of how we have come to

expect trouble, tedium, and torture in our daily lives. But what happens when we do this?

We focus on the wrong things! We fall prey to inattentive blindness! We are missing the chance to see Jesus! We fail to see Jesus in the homeless person on the bus or in our reclusive neighbor...in the student struggling in school, or the baby crying in the grocery line...in the protesters on TV or in the police officers rushing to a crime scene.

When we are mired in our own grief or distracted by our earthly commitments or afraid for ourselves, we are missing Jesus. How many times have you walked by Jesus, and you didn't even know it? If it can happen to Mary Magdalene, if it can happen to the disciples, it can happen to us.

Brothers and sisters, today, **expect** to see Jesus. *Expect to see Jesus.* Seek to encounter the risen Christ everywhere and every day.

The good news is this: We live in a world where the risen Christ appears in places where we least expect him – especially those places where we've locked our hearts and minds.

Today, let Jesus unlock the door of your heart and mind. Look beyond what you normally see. Pay attention to what's really there. Expect to see Jesus. And, like Mary Magdalene and the disciples, rejoice because you have seen the Lord.