

PRACTICE THE PRESENCE OF GOD

In his wonderful new book, *Living Jesus*, New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson asks what he contends is the most important question concerning Jesus: “Do we think he is dead or alive?” Johnson observes, in a disarmingly plainspoken way, “It makes a big difference whether we think someone is dead or alive. To the person in either of those conditions it probably makes an even bigger difference. But it certainly also matters to anyone interested in that person.”

Johnson then goes on to spell out some of the differences: We can continue to learn about someone who is dead even after he or she is gone. If it is an historical figure, we can do careful research that reveals something new about the person’s life and character. Or, if the person is someone we knew alive, we may hear a story that no one ever told us before. We may come across a letter buried in the leaves of an old book that reveals aspects of the person’s life we did not know. Through such encounters our perspectives on someone who is dead may change and *we* may be changed by that new understanding. In these ways, sometimes it can even seem as if our relationship with the one who has died has changed, even after they are gone. Nevertheless, as Johnson starkly reminds us, “The dead stay still. Their deeds are ended; their words are complete. Others have quite literally taken their place, walking over the spot where they lie buried. They neither move nor complain.”

“When we think someone is alive,” Johnson goes on to say, “we have a completely different set of expectations. People who are still alive are still capable of doing new things and saying new things. They can change their minds. They can show up in different places from the ones they used to inhabit. They can surprise us. They can appear on our doorstep, contact us in the middle of a family celebration, arrive at our bedside when we are sick.”

So, let’s go back to the question with which we started: “Is Jesus dead or alive?”

Let’s be clear: the question is not whether Jesus lives on in the sense that Shakespeare lives on through his plays or Socrates lives on through the lives of those he influenced. If such great people live on, they live on in the way that dead people are said to “live on.” But does Jesus live today in a way that is different from that?

Other questions seem to ripple out from that one: Can we refer to Jesus only in the past tense, or also in the present tense? Is Jesus merely a memory we can study and analyze, or an agent who can confront and instruct? Do we only learn *about* him, or can we also speak of continuing to learn *from* him? Is his story complete, or is it still being written? Can we only expect to learn some surprising things about him, or can he surprise us still? Is he buried or still roaming around?

The very last words of Matthew's Gospel, are these words of assurance the risen Christ gave to his followers, "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Now, what does he mean by that? The disciples came to see such an intimate connection between the risen Jesus and the Holy Spirit he shared with them that they came to call that Spirit, "The Spirit of Jesus." Now, please understand that this presence is something much more than when we say, "Well, I'll be with you in spirit," which usually means, "I wish I could be with you, but I can't, so I'll be thinking about you." No, to say that Jesus is alive through the power of the Holy Spirit is to affirm that he is powerfully present, in ways that are more immediate and compelling than when one is merely present in body. It is through the Holy Spirit, then, that Jesus himself is with us to the end of the age.

But quoting the Bible doesn't answer the question, does it? The Bible records the promise, but to see whether the promise has been fulfilled we must look closer to home, closer to now. To say that Jesus is alive is to affirm that every day brings fresh opportunities to see him at work. But, indeed, some people see him at work in the world and others don't.

In this way, not much has changed in two thousand years. On the first Easter, some saw Jesus while others doubted. For the most part, those who saw him, at least initially, were those who had been his closest followers during his lifetime. Wishful thinking? Projection? Here's another possibility: Those who had spent the most time with him, and had learned the most from him, those who had let Jesus reshape the way they viewed the world and lived in the world, were the best prepared to see him. So, yes, those who knew him best were given something of a head start. It takes something like competence to see Jesus in the world after his death—faith, yes, but faith shaped in practice. It takes practice.

You know, I wrote the book on doubt. Or, to be accurate, I wrote *a* book on doubt about ten years ago. The aim of that book was to delineate a positive role for doubt in the life of faith. But if someone were to say to me, "I doesn't make any sense to me to say that Jesus is alive. I don't see that at all," I would ask, "How much practice do you have? I don't expect you to see Jesus alive until you have a whole lot more practice."

If you want to get some practice, here's a suggestion on where to begin: Spend time with those who see Jesus alive. Malcolm Muggeridge was a hard-bitten, curmudgeonly journalist and an atheist *until* the BBC sent him to India to do a story on Mother Teresa of Calcutta. He wrote: "She is a nun, rather slightly built, with a few rupees in her pocket; not particularly clever, or particularly gifted in the arts of persuasion. Just with this Christian love shining about her, in her heart and on her lips. Just prepared to follow her Lord, and in accordance with his instructions regard every derelict left to die in the streets as him; to hear in the cry of every abandoned child, even in the tiny squeak of the discarded fetus, the cry of the Bethlehem child; to recognize in every leper's stumps the hands which once touched the sightless eyes and made them see, rested on distracted heads and made them calm, brought back health to sick flesh and twisted limbs." After that experience, Muggeridge, to the wonder of his friends and to his own astonishment, became a practicing Christian. After a time even Muggeridge began to see Jesus alive.

It seems to me that saints are those who see what we cannot see and help us see what we would not otherwise see. But you don't need to learn how to see Jesus from a canonized saint. Just spend some time with those who see Jesus. Spend time with those who already have more practice. For instance, we could spend time with someone who is recovering from addiction, whose eyes are fixed on Jesus, who *knows* beyond the telling that Jesus is alive because he is experiencing Jesus' continuing ability to heal.

Something like this occurred to me at the Love Feast at Charles Street Church on this past Wednesday night. A number of the members of our partner congregation gave powerful testimonies to how Jesus is at work in their lives. I don't know which would be more difficult: to convince these brothers and sisters that Jesus is not alive, or to spend much time with them and not see Jesus ourselves. To see Jesus ourselves we have to spend time with those who already have that ability. It takes a certain competence to see Jesus alive and at work in the world. And that means it takes practice.

Often, when we are just starting out, our practice may take the form of acting as if we see Jesus alive. Perhaps that means acting as if the person next to you actually is your brother or your sister when, for the most part, we are all very practiced at seeing those around us as simply the people around us. Perhaps it means praying for our enemies as Jesus told us to do, because there would be no other reason to prayer for our enemies than if we were told to do so by a living Lord who means business. Perhaps it means seeing the face of Jesus, not just in the despondent faces of the Albanians fleeing Kosovo, but also in their tormentors, the very ones we are bombing. That's going to take some practice.

When you meet a stranger, that is a good time to practice. Respond to that person as if she were Jesus, because as the Celtic proverb has it, "Oft, oft, oft goes the Christ in the stranger's disguise." Try responding to the poor in the same way because, according to Mother Teresa, Jesus is always showing up in his distressing disguise as one of the poor.

In fact, you just never know where Jesus is going to show up next. That's one of the characteristics of someone who is alive. You never know where Jesus is going to show up. But it takes practice to see him. At first we act as if we see Jesus alive so that, in time, we may do the same things because we know he is alive; we have seen him. Like most forms of practice, it takes time and requires some patience. Those who were Jesus' disciples spent three years with him, every hour of every day. During that time, they were learning what he had to teach them while he was alive and learning how to see him after he rose. We're not expected to have that competence right away. It takes practice. Which means that if you don't see Jesus alive today, on this Easter morning—well, that's one of the reasons that we gather here again next week.