

Easter Sunday

Surprise Encounters! - Matthew 28:1-10

Have you ever had the experience of meeting someone you never thought you'd ever see again? Or have you have met one of those persons in an unexpected place? Let me tell you a few of my experiences.

About twenty years ago I was sitting in Glasgow airport waiting for the shuttle to London, from where I was travelling back to Canada. One of the aircrew on my flight was a friend of my sister's, and I was sitting talking to her as the passengers came off the plane I was about to board. I wasn't paying any attention to them, when suddenly I heard a voice behind me, "*Neal Mathers is that you?*"

I looked up and saw a fellow named Bill. I had first met Bill, another minister and fellow Scot, in Pasadena, California, when we both ended up in the same Doctor of Ministry class. Here's the thing. I lived in Canada, Bill lives in New Zealand. When we parted ways in California I doubt either of us ever expected to see each other again. Now here we were, several years later, crossing paths as he got off the plane I was about to get on to!

Have you ever had the experience of meeting someone you never thought you'd ever see again? It can be a pretty amazing experience! Or have you have met one of those persons in an unexpected place?

When I was growing up one of my classmates was David Strachan. David lived just around the corner from me, and his dad Stanley was an elder in the congregation my father was minister off. While I went into ministry, David went on to become responsible for religious broadcasting in Scotland.

I learned years later that his dad, Stanley, felt God's call to ministry, and as a mature student became a minister of the Church of Scotland. I hadn't seen David or his dad since 1970 when my father accepted a call to a village church outside of Glasgow and we moved away from my home town. Then one day, about ten years ago, I came home to find a message on my phone. "*Neal. This is Stanley Strachan. You may remember me from your days in Montrose. I am in Collingwood. You can call me at*"

So I called. I learned that Stanley's first wife Iris had died, and Stanley had remarried and his step-daughter was teaching at the University of Guelph. He was now retired from ministry so he and his wife had come to visit her daughter. It was semester break. The daughter had brought them to Collingwood for a few days to explore the Georgian Bay area.

Stanley was a great Rotarian and the Collingwood Rotary Club met in the hotel complex they were staying at. So he went to their meeting and happened to sit next to one of the elders in my congregation.

"What do you do,?" The elder asked. "I'm a retired Church of Scotland minister." "My minister came from the Church of Scotland. His dad was a Church of Scotland minister as well", said Ken. "What's his name?" "Neal Mathers". "Neal Mathers, Alan Mathers' son?" Stanley responded. "Yes, his dad's name is Alan", said Ken, who had spent time visiting with my dad a few years earlier when my dad and mum were visiting in Canada. And so we met. We hadn't seen each other for 37 years and we meet because of a chance encounter between two strangers.

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If you are on Facebook you know how that social network enables you to reconnect with all kinds of people you never thought you'd ever see or hear from again. Facebook really does illustrate what is called the "*Six Degrees of Separation*". The idea, which was first laid out in 1929, is that there are only six steps needed to connect one person with another. Sometimes fewer.

So my sister worked for British Airways. She was in charge of the aircrew on this particular long haul flight. She had never met the pilot before but he thought he recognized her name and on that flight my sister and he worked out that he was married to my first cousin Carol.

Because of the circumstances of my uncle and aunt's divorce I had lost touch with my cousins in 1966! It is now 2004, almost 40 years later. Through that chance encounter on a plane, my sister and my cousin Carol get together. They talk. Carol's sister, Ruth, had immigrated to Canada and was living in London, Ontario. I was living in Collingwood, Ontario. Through my sister and Carol, Ruth and I reconnect, and now see each other as often as we can.

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So here are the disciples, thinking that they would see never see Jesus again. Having watched him die. Having seen him buried. Having watched the stone seal his grave. And suddenly Jesus reappears in their lives. Suddenly. Unexpectedly. There is shock, amazement, and tears. Mary meets him in the Garden. His disciples meet him as they gather behind locked doors, when he suddenly appears among them. Thomas meets him in a place of doubt and comes to faith when he sees his nail scarred hands and wounds. Seven disciples met him when they went on a fishing trip. Cleopas and his friend met him as they walked along the road between Jerusalem and the village of Emmaus.

Wherever the people were, whatever they were doing, one thing is clear, they did not expect to see Jesus again. But just like some of our personal encounters, life is full of surprises. It still is. In my experience, Jesus often appears to us, and he does so in unexpected ways and at unexpected moments.

Let me tell you another story to get you thinking about that. The story is called "*The Cobbler and His Guest*." Long ago there lived in the city of Marseilles an old shoemaker, who is neighbours affectionately called "Father Martin."

One Christmas Eve he sat alone in his little shop, reading of the visit of the wise men to the infant Jesus, and of the gifts they brought. He said to himself, "*If tomorrow were the first Christmas, and if Jesus were to be born in Marseilles this night, I know what I would give Him!*"

He arose and took from a shelf two little shoes of softest snow-white leather, with bright silver buckles, "*I would give Him these, my finest work. How pleased His mother would be! But I'm a foolish old man,*" he thought, smiling. "*The Master has no need for my poor gifts.*"

Replacing the shoes, he blew out the candle, and retired to rest. Hardly had he closed his eyes, it seemed, when he heard a voice call his name, "*Martin!*" Intuitively, he felt aware of the identity of the speaker. "*Martin, you have longed to see Me. Tomorrow I shall pass by your window. If you see Me and bid Me enter, I shall be your guest and sit at your table.*"

He was so happy he did not sleep. Before it was dawn he got up and tidied up his little shop. He spread fresh sand on the floor, and wrapped green bows of fir along the rafters. On the table he placed a loaf of white bread, a jar of honey, and a pitcher of milk; and over the fire he hung a hot drink. His simple preparations were complete.

When all was in readiness, he took up his vigil at the window. He was sure he would know the Master. As he watched the driving sleet and rain in the cold, deserted street, he thought of the joy that would be his when he sat down and broke bread with his Guest.

Presently he saw an old street sweeper pass by, blowing upon his thin, gnarled hands to warm them. "*Poor fellow! He must be half-frozen,*" thought Martin. Opening the door, he called out to him, "*Come in, my friend, and warm yourself, and drink something hot.*" No further urging was needed, and the man gratefully accepted the invitation.

An hour passed, and Martin next saw a poor, badly clothed woman carrying a baby. She paused, wearily, to rest in the shelter of his doorway. Quickly he flung open the door. *"Come in and warm while you rest,"* he said to her. *"You are not well?"* he asked.

"I am going to the hospital. I hope they will take me in, and my baby," she explained. *"My husband is at sea, and I am ill, without a soul to whom I can go."* *"Poor child!"* cried the old man. *"You must eat something while you are getting warm. Let me give a cup of milk to the little one. Ah! What a bright, pretty little fellow he is! Why, you have no shoes on him!"* *"I have no shoes for him,"* sighed the mother.

"Then he shall have this lovely pair I finished yesterday." And Martin took down the soft little snow-white shoes he had looked at the evening before, and slipped them on the child's feet. They fit perfectly. And shortly the young mother went her way full of gratitude, and Martin went back to his post at the window.

Hour after hour went by, and many needy souls shared the meager hospitality of the old cobbler, but the expected Guest did not appear. At last, when night had fallen, Father Martin retired to his cot with a heavy heart. *"It was only a dream,"* he sighed. *"I did hope and believe, but He has not come."*

Suddenly, so it seemed to his weary eyes, the room was flooded with a glorious light; and to the cobbler's astonished vision there appeared before him, one by one, the poor street sweeper, the sick mother and her baby, and all the people whom he had aided during the day. Each one smiled at him and asked, *"Have you not seen me? Did I not sit at your table?"* and vanished.

Then softly out of the silence he heard again the gentle Voice, repeating the old, familiar words: *"Whoever receives a little child in my name receives me."* *"For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink". I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!"*

I wonder.

Where will the risen Jesus turn up in our lives this week?

And when he does, will we recognize him?

PASTORAL PRAYER

Lord Jesus,

You have promised us,
"Because I live you will live also".
May your life be revealed in our lives,
and in our actions.

Remind us often, we pray, of the words of St. Teresa of Avila that:
Christ has no body now on earth but ours,
No hands but ours,
No feet but ours,
Ours are the eyes through which is to look out Christ's compassion to the world;
Ours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good;
Ours are the hands with which he is to bless humanity now.

And so we recommit ourselves this day,
to reveal your life through ours, and
to do what is right, to love mercy,
and to walk humbly with our God,
in Jesus Name. Amen.