Jenny Vrieze died a few weeks ago. Truth be told, she’s wanted to die for the last year or two. At 94 she led a long-rich-colorful life as an artist, philosopher’s wife, mother, grandmother, and iconoclast. She was strong of mind and fiercely independent. She grew up in the Netherlands in the aftermath of World War II, moved to Canada, and settled in the south suburbs of Chicago. She knew the heartbreak of losing her husband and a son to cancer. She didn’t suffer fools gladly and often chaffed against the church. It was primarily Hope folks who helped navigate her transition to a nursing home. Therefore, she blamed Hope. So, when I’d visit our time was mostly spent with me trying to convince her that Hope had not driven her out of her home. With my deft pastoral touch, she was usually more upset when I left than when I arrived…. 

Like so many, because of the pandemic, Jenny died without family or friend at her side. And, without being able to gather for a wake or funeral, we wait for a day when family and friend can gather to remember, celebrate, and commend her to God’s peace…. 

I’ve been struck by the finality of death and the incompleteness of not being able to gather to grieve. For thousands upon thousands who are dying during the COVID-19 crisis traditional patterns and processes for dealing with death are disrupted. Wakes and funerals are for the living; what’s lost right now are the rites and rituals that help us begin to absorb, sort out, grieve, and maybe even find a grateful hope. What’s ruptured is that liminal space where the tomb, the ashes, the processional, the dirt, the body helps us enfold death into our living. 

Thomas Lynch, an undertaker and writer, notes that we’re the only species that does that. In his words:

*Cocker spaniels do not bother with this, nor do rock bass, nor rhododendrons, nor any other thing that lives and dies.*

*But, we do…. ours is a species that down the millennia has learned to deal with death (the idea of the thing) by dealing with the dead (the thing itself) … We process grief by processing the object of our grief, the bodies of the dead, from one place to the next. We bear mortality by bearing mortals – the living and the dead – to the brink of a changed reality: heaven or Valhalla or whatever is next. We commit and commend them into nothingness or somethingness, into the presence of God or God’s absence. Whatever afterlife there is or isn’t, human*
beings have marked their ceasing to be by going to the tomb or the fire or the grave, the holy tree or deep sea, whatever sacred space of oblivion to which we consign our dead.

And that, dear friends, is the very human moment that our text in Luke opens up.

Two friends and followers of Jesus are trying to absorb the loss and make sense of the reports of an empty tomb. Maybe they saw the dead body of Jesus being pried off the nails, or saw the grave sealed up and consigned the dead to some sacred space, but it’s three days later and they can’t shake the memory of:

- an intimate meal on Thursday,
- a crucifixion against a dark Friday sky,
- the empty numbness of Saturday,
- and the unsettling Sunday morning news of a missing body.

Three days later and longing, wonder, questions and fear are loosed in them. So, they did what we all would do – one foot in front of the other, shoulder to shoulder, they walked and talked. Turning all these things over in their minds, they turned toward home. There was work to get to tomorrow.

And then Jesus appears.

He doesn’t sneak up, saunter by, or pop out from behind the bushes, but while they’re lost in conversation Jesus appears. And, the resurrected body was somehow different – transfigured, transformed, transfixed…. They’d just had dinner together on Thursday, but in the slanted light of late Sunday afternoon they don’t recognize him.

Of course, they’re in good company:

- Mary Magdalene mistakes Jesus for the gardener – until he says her name.
- Peter sees Jesus walking on the shore and doesn’t recognize him.
- Thomas needs to stick his finger in the wounds.
- Jesus appears among his closest friends and needs to assure them that he is not a ghost before he orders the catch of the day.

When Lazarus was raised from the dead he walked out of the tomb with his body still bound in burial bandages and his face wrapped in a cloth. There was no mistaking who he was….

But, the resurrection of Jesus was different. Somehow, Jesus was physical enough to walk and eat and bear the marks of his passion, but spiritual enough to materialize through closed doors and disappear before dessert. Somehow, he was different enough to be missed and familiar enough to be recognized. In writing about the resurrection Paul uses the oxymoron of a “spiritual body.”

So, even if we cling to a historical-physical-resurrection of Jesus, there certainly was something changed, something different, something other. And, given that, maybe these
stories of resurrection appearances serve other themes and motifs than simply to offer evidence that Jesus was dead but now is alive.

What hooks me in this passage is the use of the Greek word *paroikos*, which is translated as stranger, foreigner, exile, or alien. The two walking toward Emmaus, are so stunned by the inquiry of Jesus about their conversation, that they stop dead in their tracks, drop their faces in sadness, and ask if he such an outsider to Jerusalem that he doesn’t know what happened.

Jesus appears as an alien. I don’t mean as some apparition from outer-space, but I mean as an outsider. He doesn’t appear with pageantry or a gilded crown, he doesn’t appear in synagogue or sanctuary, but in his resurrection, just like his incarnation, he appears as one on the margins, as one hardly recognized, as an alien.

Now. I know that he warms their minds with scripture and cracks their hearts open in the breaking of the bread. I know that this passage points to the centrality of scripture and sacrament if you want to see Jesus. I know that he undercuts custom and as the guest is the one who blesses, breaks, and gives the bread. But, is it too far of a stretch to also see in this story that Jesus appears when we least expect him, in the midst of broken dreams, on the long walk home, as an outsider?

I came of age in the seventies. In the summers I went to church camps where shaggy-haired college students in corduroy and Earth Shoes became my guitar-slinging heroes. Consequently, my impressionable young mind was filled with a bunch of Christian-camp-fire-sing-along-songs.

And now – forty some years later – those lyrics still seep through. This week I had in my head a song by John Fisher with the lyrics:

*Have you seen Jesus, my Lord?*
*He’s here in plain view,*
*Take a look, open your eyes*
*He’ll show it to you....*

And – forty some years later – I still long to see the Jesus of plain view. For, there is clearly something elusive and mysterious about seeing Jesus. He burns in our hearts and vanishes like a flame. We find comfort in Jesus and we trudge back home in confusion.

In the words of Fredrick Buechner:

*This is the substance of what I want to talk about: the clack-clack of my life. The occasional, obscure glimmering through of grace. The muffled presence of the*
holy. The images, always broken, partial, ambiguous, of Christ. If a vision of Christ, then a vision such as those two stragglers had at Emmaus at suppertime: just the cracking of crust as the loaf came apart in his hands ragged and white before in those most poignant of words in all scripture: ‘He vanished from their sight’ – whoever he was, whoever they were. Whoever we are.

Whoever we are…

Dear friends, is it too much of a stretch to suggest that we see Jesus, even today, on the margins, as an outsider, as an alien? If we’re looking for Jesus in plain view might we see him in a Syrian refugee camp, in a food line in Roseland, or on a respirator? If we’re looking for Jesus should we look for him among the broken and the suffering?

Or is that too much of a stretch?

Jesus Christ – the visible expression of the invisible God – is found in scripture and in sacrament, but Jesus is also found

in the poor,
the outsider,
the unorthodox,
in the places we least expect.

And if we would see Jesus on the margins, even among those most vulnerable to COVID-19, might we then be joined with them in solidarity and sacrifice. Might we change our walk home. If Jesus appears when longing, loss, and fear are loosed in us – then may learn to walk slowly together, waiting and listening and looking.

And, whoever we are…

May our eyes be open to see Jesus.
May our hearts be open to receive Jesus.
May we welcome Jesus in the foreigner, the alien, and the outsider.
May we be found by Jesus even when we’re walking away, even when we least expect him.

Amen.