

Author Diana Butler Bass shares in her book *Grounded* about her experience of moving into her current neighborhood in Arlington, VA outside of Washington, DC.

Coincidentally, my family vacationed there last week. Diana Butler Bass described her experience this way.

“When I first moved to our current neighborhood, I was not entirely happy with the choice. We had moved to Washington, DC at a time of rising housing prices. We bought a decent house that we could afford within a reasonable commute to my husband’s job. On a modest street that looks like thousands of other American streets, it was not my dream house. For a time, I referred to it as the “People parking garage,” the place we came to and went from, and those living nearby did likewise. I hoped I was a good neighbor, mowing the lawn, being relatively quiet, taking out the trash, but I confess, I thought of my own neighborhood as an ‘it.’

Until a particular day, that is. A cab driver was bringing me home from the airport. He was a nice fellow, a Sikh immigrant, very talkative about his faith and his love for America. As we turned into my subdivision, he exclaimed, “What a beautiful neighborhood!” “What?” I asked. I always see the flaws, the siding that needs to be replaced, gardens in need of tending, and houses, like mine, with outdated kitchens, bathrooms too small, and bulging closets.

“Look at these tidy houses!” he exclaimed, “everyone in the whole world should live on a street like this! I bet you have nice neighbors! This is everyone’s dream to grow up in a place like this! You are so lucky!” The taxicab driver saw my neighborhood more clearly than I saw it, and I became determined to see my world differently. I started to take long walks around the neighborhood, noticing things and praying, for people I knew and people I did not know, chatting with folks as I walked, not just passing by. As I walked and prayed, I learned that my neighborhood was not just a suburban parking lot. These houses were not objects. They were, instead, the stages of many lives, where families like my own played out all sorts of joys and sorrows, successes and failures. My walks became a spiritual practice, as I wondered what went on in my neighbors’ houses, trying to enter into, through my peripatetic prayers, their lives. The neighborhood itself came alive, became a subject, a ‘thou.’”

Bass' story shows what it means to look at a situation or a challenge or a problem from a different perspective. When we look at a situation from a different perspective then we can see something that we never would have been able to see before.

In our story that we read today from the gospel writer John we see a challenge before the disciples and we see Jesus offering a different perspective in how to tackle the challenge. The solution that Jesus offers is very simple but one that the disciples had not considered before.

The story we read comes after the Easter resurrection. According to John's version, Jesus appears first to Mary Magdalene. Then Jesus appears to a group of followers that most likely includes the 11 remaining disciples as well as other followers who are locked away in a room. Jesus then appears to Thomas. And then we get to this story.

Many biblical scholars think that this story that we have read is not part of the original gospel of John but may have been added later. In the gospel story that we have read, Simon Peter tells the other disciples that he is going out to fish. The others offer to go with him. Fishing is not for sport. Fishing is their livelihood. So they all go out to fish together in the night.

The 7 or so men fish all night in their fishing boat and they catch nothing. An entire night's work and they have nothing to show for it except tired and achy muscles. I often wonder how well these 7 or so men got along with each other. Did they bicker about where they should fish? Did they blame each other for not catching any fish? We don't know. But we do know that whatever they were trying was not working.

As the sun begins to rise over the Sea of Galilee, the fishermen catch a glimpse of a man along the shore. They do not recognize who he is. Jesus calls out to them, "children, you have no fish do you?" Calling them "children" is a term of endearment. "No," they yell back still not recognizing who is talking to them. "Then throw your nets over to the other side," he yells back.

When the 7 fishermen agree to throw their nets over to the other side of the boat, they do not recognize Jesus at this point. They follow the advice of this stranger and try something different. They don't do it because they are trying to follow Jesus. They do it because this stranger offers them a different perspective on the challenge before them and they trust his advice enough to try it. Only after seeing the results do they realize that they are following Jesus.

Tying this story into our story, we too may find ourselves facing a particular challenge in our lives and we can't seem to find a solution. Maybe we too have tried to tackle this challenge the same way over and over and we can't figure out a solution. I once heard that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result.

And so we look for a solution to whatever we are facing and we are expecting some type of dramatic epiphany of a 50 foot high recognizable Jesus to fix what we are facing. But in the story that we read there is no 50 foot high recognizable Jesus that offers a different way of looking at the challenge. There are no dramatic words from above that tell these disciples what to do.

Instead, the presence of Christ and wisdom from Christ comes through the words of someone that they believe to be a stranger. They don't know who this stranger is. But we know as we read the story that this stranger is the risen Christ. The fishermen follow his advice and throw their nets over the other side of the boat.

They act not knowing that they are following Christ's invitation. As they follow his advice they catch fish in abundance. When they catch the fish they realize that they have had an encounter with Christ.

Diana Butler Bass shares another story that I think gives witness to how a simple act of showing care and concern can be an incredible way of giving witness and experiencing the love of the risen Christ and giving witness to the love of Jesus Christ.

p. 256-258. (Bass tells the story of being in an airport and noticing a man who is alone near her and crying. She asks him about what is going on and he explains that he had just buried his wife's body and that he was returning home all alone. She tells this to the flight attendant and the rest of the 15 passengers on their flight find out about his story. The man sits in rear of plane. When it is time to depart the passengers all rise together in silence and wait for the man to depart first. As he departs they express their concern and care. He is then escorted off of the plane by the crew. This act gave the man a sense that God was with him during this difficult and lonely time.)

The presence of the risen Christ doesn't always come in dramatic ways. Sometimes it comes in the simple act of listening to someone tell their story or someone listening to our story.

Let us be the ones who help provide a different perspective.

And may we be the one to allow Christ to be revealed to us through the simple acts of others.

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-Text: John 21:1-14

-Given: April 17, 2016 in Allison Creek Presbyterian Church (York, SC)