

The Rev. Billy Cerveney:

Awesome. I love it. Hey, pray with me, Father. Thank you for the gift of your word. Thank you for the gift of this day. Thank you for the gift of our young people.

We love you, Jesus. I would ask that you'd send your Holy Spirit now. Would you open the eyes of our hearts?

Because nothing that we attempt to do here, nothing that we are intellect or any of our best intentions cannot ascend to you, Lord. Only you can reveal yourself to us as you crack the doors of our hearts. Would you please do that? We could see you. We could hear you. We could feel you, Lord, and encounter you. I thank you, Jesus. You are who you say you are. Help us believe that in your name, Jesus. Amen.

How we doing? Awesome. Good. You know, I was having a conversation with a buddy of mine the other day, and I realized that in the city of Jacksonville, you can determine a lot or what age group you're in or what generation you are, and how old you are by talking about what mall you went to growing up as a kid.

There's been a lot of incarnations of shopping malls in Jacksonville, and they're all very different, like Roosevelt Mall. You want to remember Roosevelt Mall, right, when it was around? You remember the ducks in Roosevelt Mall? Can you smell the ducks? You know what I'm talking about? Did you ever get like a by a mouse at the Woolworths there?

If you saw the—if you remember seeing the ducks at Roosevelt Mall, it's time to schedule your colonoscopy, because that's how old you are.

That's where we are. Then we had Regency Mall. Regency Mall. I remember when they opened out, it was like the new hotness. Everyone would go out there. Have you been there recently? Zombie Apocalypse. You don't want to go to Regency Mall. But there was one store that—I can't remember if it was Regency or Orange Park Mall. It might ever actually still be there. It was always this store that intrigued me because I could never go inside of it. It was Spencer's. Do you guys remember Spencer's Gifts? Does that still exist? Everybody's laughing, because you know exactly what I'm talking about. I don't know if it was a headshot or what was going on in there because I never could go in. But I remember I'd walk by, and all I knew was that bad things happened beyond the sort of black light posters that were in the front hall.

And we're always, though, inevitably at Spencer's, there was this one thing that sat there on an easel. And they always had, right at the door, was a poster. And it was one of these 3D posters. You know what I'm talking about? It was one of these posters. You walk up, and it just looked like a mass of colored lines and whatnot. But if you stood at it, and you stared at it a certain way, all of a sudden it would go three-dimensional, and you could see into it, and see all these objects.

There were three types of people that looked at that poster. The first one was the people that walked up to it, and they saw it immediately. They were like, "Dude, it's a dolphin in a spaceship coming out of the ocean." And they'd, you know, it was the kind of thing that would be at Spencer's. And I hated those people because I could never really see it. So I'd be like, "Yeah, totally. Great dolphin."

And then you had the second group of people that would see the poster, and they were like, "Oh, that's a neat idea." But they couldn't actually see what it was. They couldn't really have an encounter with it, so they just kind of wandered off.

And then there's the third type of person, which I was in the group, which I think is the most maddening portion, or maddening group to be in. It's the people that would go, you would stare at it, it would start to reveal itself, and then it'd go away. Or there you'd have this encounter with it, and it would be like, "I see the dolphin. I see the spaceship. I see the whole thing." And then all of a sudden it would go flat, and I would sit there forever trying to get it to do it again. And everything about my experience was trying to recapture that experience I had just a minute ago.

And I would spend burnt endless time.

See, one of the things you see when you read the resurrection story about Jesus is what transforms people, and everyone that you read in the Gospels, they're transformed by Jesus.

It's not them realizing that Jesus was a historical reality.

It wasn't, though that's true, and it's profound. It wasn't that the theological implications of the resurrection, though they're very profound theological implications.

It wasn't that they got these new marching orders for Jesus that transformed their heart. What transformed their heart is they had this profound encounter with the risen Lord. They saw Him.

There was something about the encounter with Jesus that moved them in their deepest place, and it made them different.

And it's the same thing with us.

I can have all the theological knowledge in the world.

I can believe in the historical realities of Jesus, but I got to have this encounter.

I got to meet Him head-on.

And sometimes when I encounter Jesus, sometimes that encounter feels like standing in front of that mall poster.

And again, like that mall poster, there's three types of people that you can find. There's probably a lot more than this, but the ones that kind of present themselves to me, most obviously that first group of people, they walk in and they look at, they encounter Jesus, either be in a church or they're reading His word or they're singing a worship song and for them, it's just everything goes 3D immediately. It's a dolphin in a spaceship.

And you see those people and you're like, what is it like that everything you do, it just seems that you just fall into this Jesus experience.

And then you get these other people that come and they might ascend to it intellectually. That's right.

Or historically, but eventually, they don't have an encounter, so they just wander away.

And then there's those of us, and this was me for so many years in my life, it could still be me. Now I had a profound encounter with the Lord.

And it was transcendent. I'm like, oh my gosh, that's real. That's deep. That's profound. And then I go in my life and everything about my Christian life is trying to recapture an experience I once had. Does that sound familiar?

And it can be really frustrating when that happens.

But what we want as believers is we want to have a real and we want to have a consistent experience with Jesus.

We want him to go 3D. We want the poster to pop for us.

I don't hear what I'm not saying.

I'm not saying that we want to have this massive, our faith that needs to be marked by massive encounters, emotional encounters.

Or that everything about our faith needs to be God's special effects department. That man, I just, it's like 4th of July in my life all the time. That's not what I'm saying.

But I am saying that for you, it's the same thing as it is for me. It's the same thing it was for the disciples.

That I need to have a personal encounter that makes the Lord real to me. Makes him real.

That has this deep internal resonance. Because if I don't, like who cares?

Because I'm not encounter whatever and it might look different for you than it would be for me for sure.

But it's something that makes that coin drop. That makes it of personal significance.

And as many different people in their room, there's different hearts. And we all have different inclinations. The Lord will speak to you in different ways. But we all have to have an encounter that grounds it to the floor for us.

Now, it can be different like I said.

But when I read in John 21, I find that there's three common denominators to that experience.

And the first one is revelation.

And the second one is relationship.

And the third one is restoration. I want to talk about those a little bit.

What does revelation mean? That's a word that we hear a lot. In church, it's even a book of the Bible. It's kind of one of these kind of woo-woo books in the Bible that a lot of people don't read or take out of context.

But revelation is a big word. And we see this in the little context of our story. John 21, it's after the resurrection.

And Jesus has appeared. He's appeared to a few people. He's appeared to Mary outside of the tomb.

Then he appeared to these two random guys on the road to Emmaus. Then he appeared to the apostles who were hiding in the locked room. And Thomas wasn't there. So eight days later, he appears again to the apostles in the same room where Thomas puts his finger in Jesus's wounds. And here we are. And by the sea of Galilee, there's John and Peter. And they're fishing. They're out on a boat. We don't know what they're doing there. They're out all night long. And they don't catch anything. And Jesus calls out to them from the shore.

There's something weird that we see in all these narratives about Jesus post-resurrection is that Jesus seems hard to recognize. You ever notice that?

Like when people engage him, they're kind of like, "Ah, Jesus."

And it's not just like, "Whoa, this is too much to be." It's almost as though they can't see him. And when Mary steps into it, what happens? Mary comes out of the tomb and she's talking to this guy and she thinks it's the gardener until he calls her by name. And it's all the scales fall from her eyes. And then he's on the road to Emmaus with these guys. He spends hours with them. They don't recognize him until he breaks bread. And all of a sudden, it's he sees them. And then here we get to this place in John 21 where the disciples, they recognize him, but kind of. There's these question marks around it. They're like, "What's happening here?" And no one would dare question it.

So what happens is when you study about this and you read about the resurrected Jesus, there is a sameness to the Jesus, like pre-crucifixion and post-resurrection Jesus. There's a sameness to him. He looks like Jesus. He's got the nails in his hands, the nail marks in his hands.

He comes up and people, when they see him, they see him. They're like, "It's you. It's Jesus." But there's also this difference.

1 Corinthians 15, it says that he was raised in glory.

It says that he is what was shed, perishable. He was raised imperishable.

He was raised in power and spiritually that Jesus, he could also do things that he didn't do when he was pre-resurrection. He appeared in rooms that were locked.

So he's profoundly different.

But whether, while Jesus was recognizable, the immediate recognition wasn't always straightforward.

You see this in verse 21, and this is how it unlocks how they see him. It says, "After Jesus revealed himself," again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberius, "he revealed himself in this way." The word, they use the word reveal here in three different times in this verse.

And if you're a geek like me, and I am, I'll confess it. When you read the Greek word that the Apostle John uses for reveal here, it means, in the traditional way, what you would think is to reveal. But you learn a lot about what they're trying to say that you miss in English when you kind of pull apart the Greek there. And what John is doing is he's writing, and he uses this Greek verb in what Greek nerds would call a divine passive. And what does that mean?

It's when there's an action that's happening. Somebody's doing something, but the one that's really doing the action in it, it's God.

That God is really the mover in this story, not the person that you see in front of him.

And so what John is saying here is when Jesus revealed himself, what it's not saying is he's not saying that Jesus just showed up so they could see him.

What it's saying is that this is a theophany, that Jesus showed up and they really couldn't see him. But there was an unveiling that the Holy Spirit was moving or the Father was moving or Jesus was moving in a miraculous way that pulled the veils from their eyes that they could recognize what they couldn't see on their own.

They could see Jesus, and every one of them that saw it, they crumpled in gratitude or humility or in awe.

So what's happening here, when you read about Peter jumping in the water, it's not because, "Oh, I recognize Jesus." It's because Jesus was revealed to him. And there was a response to that.

So why does that matter?

Because we're no different than them.

I am no different than John or Peter or Mary or the two guys on the road to Emmaus. They could not, just as you could not, see Jesus on your own.

You can't recognize it. It requires the eyes of your heart being opened.

And while it's a good analogy for our experience, that means that Jesus is not a 3D mall poster. It is not about, like, if I just squint at him the right way, or if I cock my head this way, or if I pay the attention to this corner or this color, then all of a sudden I will get Jesus. No, Jesus wasn't kidding when he said in John 6, what did he say? "No one, no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them." No one.

And this matters because it creates this freedom.

And it creates a humility in the way that I read the Bible, the way that I worship, the way that I approach Jesus, or anything designed to make me encounter. Because my solution to when I'm struggling to see Jesus, it's not that I've got to pray harder, or that I've got to believe harder, or be more fierce, or more spiritual.

You ever had those times in your life when you're praying and you feel like you're just trying to squeeze your prayers up to God?

Yeah, me too. Those times where I'm throwing him his heart and my prayers land at my feet like a flat tennis ball.

See, that's not the solution. At least when we learn that Jesus is the one that opens our eyes, what happens, we realize in that moment is that we are called to pray, but we're called to pray more dependently, more humbly.

When I come to Jesus and I say, "Lord, I believe you. Would you help my unbelief?"

"Well, I've seen you, but I know that I can't see you unless you pull the scales from my eyes."

"Lord, I hear you, but I cannot hear you unless you take my fingers out of my ears. Tune my heart to your grace. It is on you, Lord."

And that's freeing because guess what?

That means that when I am going trying to see Jesus, it doesn't depend on my intellectual prowess.

I don't have to be some theological ninja to climb the stairs to get to the encounter with Jesus.

It means that if I want you to experience Jesus, I don't have to use some tricky story or some great metaphor or some illustration to like get you to see the point.

I can be the best speaker in the world and it doesn't matter either the Lord draws you to him or he will pull the eyes or it doesn't matter.

It's a freeing thing because I can go to the Lord and I know that when he comes and he reveals himself, he does it by, as John Calvin would say, he would condescend to me. He would take a knee. He would gather my heart in his hands. He would breathe on it and he'd make it so I can see him.

What's more interesting to me and I read this, it's not just that God is the one who reveals himself, but it's how he reveals himself and where he reveals himself.

Because when you read this story, he does it, he always does it in this relationship.

It's always in this relationship. We go to John 21. What happens here? Jesus doesn't just walk onto the shore and be like, "Hey, it's me. Jesus is here."

Strike up the band." That's not what he does. He stands on the shore. It's a slow burn. The disciples are fishing. They haven't caught anything all night.

He stands on the shore. He builds a fire. He takes the fish and he cooks it for him. He hasn't waiting for him. He takes his time. He calls them.

This wasn't just some way to build dramatic tension for Jesus. Why was he doing it this way? Because he was pursuing them. Then is the way he had pursued them before he had died. He wasn't calling them out of their stories to have a Jesus experience. He was stepping into the center of their stories. He was standing on their seashores. It is in the middle of their stories where they did life in the context where they needed a savior that Jesus moved to reveal himself.

That is true of him and that is true for us. Man, that is the difference between a relationship with Jesus and the cold religion.

Because here's what Jesus didn't do. Jesus didn't send them an invitation to go to the synagogue and I'll meet you there. He met them by their empty nets.

He didn't wait for them to put together some well-crafted prayer for them. He met them in the mundane details of their hunger and fed them breakfast.

He stepped into the details of their life and I please don't hear what I'm not saying. This is one of those don't hear what I'm not saying sermons.

I am not saying that church or beautiful prayers are bad, obviously. Right? But what I am saying is if if we have those things without an encounter with Jesus in the details of our life, then we have nothing. We need the real Jesus that we encounter here that we need to drag into the details of our life because that is where it matters. It's where it counts because that's where you're hurting.

If the church is in a vehicle by which we can encounter Jesus in that way and impact the rest of our lives, what are we doing? I don't need a God who hides in the church and neither do you. And thank God we don't have one of those. We need a God that that will we come to this church so we unpack the truth of the gospel. We build community. We worship. We come to the Lord's table. We get ministered to and word and sacrament. We gather in community. We lock arms in a mission and we say let's do this.

Let's step out in the details of each other's stories that I'm going to step into the details of your life in the same way Jesus stepped into the details of mine. It will make a profound impact, not just on me, but on the world.

Do you know a Jesus like that? Do you have an encounter with Jesus in that real way? I pray you do. Do you have a Jesus that steps out of stained glass windows and into your bad hair days? Into those places in your life where it really matters.

If you don't, I really encourage you. I would really encourage you to ask a better question. Ask a better question because I promise you there's a better answer.

And his answer is a person and he will go with you. So he reveals himself in relationship, but he also does it in our redemption.

John 21. He's Jesus. He sees the disciples and he calls to Peter. They've been out all night. They don't catch anything. He calls them, tells them to throw the nets on the other side of the boat and they catch this huge haul.

This story sound familiar? Because this is the exact same thing that happened when Jesus called Peter in the beginning of the story.

When Jesus called Peter in Luke five, I believe it was, he see they've been out all night. They fish. He says, cast your nets on the other side. They pull in this massive haul. Peter comes down and this is a point where Peter had done nothing wrong in his life. He's just a fisherman, man. What does he do? He falls on his knees. He says, get away from me. I'm a sinner. Get away from me, Lord.

Fast forward to John 21. Peter's actually done something wrong now. In chapter 18, he had denied Jesus three times. Jesus had appeared a couple times, but the topic has not come up. Let's just say it's the elephant in the room.

And what is Jesus doing? He's replaying the exact story of when he called Peter. Why is he doing that? Because that first story was a story that began in grace.

It began when he said, get away from me. He says I know who you are. And he carried him and called them into ministry. And for three years, Peter walked with him and he saw the way Jesus touched unclean things and made them clean.

He gathered rejected things and accepted them unlovable things and made it unlovable. And Peter knew the kind of savior that he had.

And as he dove in that water in an act that was of total insanity, he wrapped himself in a blanket and swam 100 yards, right? Because he was out of his mind because he had to get to the feet of Jesus. Why? Because he knew the heart of his savior.

He knew the heart of his savior, but he also knew that that journey that began in grace continued in grace. And there's never a moment in our life where he wasn't requiring the full weight of the grace of Jesus.

And now it was available to him in a new way. The resurrected Jesus.

See, oftentimes we think as Christians, as maturity as this, I'm going to get to the point if I mature, I get better at this Christian thing and somehow I'm going to need Jesus less.

Let me tell you, that is not true. The more I have matured in my faith, the more I, more of a sinner I become or the more aware of my sin I become.

It's true. It's like this knob that God turns up. I'm like, come on, give me a break a little bit. But the more I become aware of my sin, but I also become more aware of the grace that I've been given in Jesus.

And when those two things come into dynamic and into play as they did for Peter, what did Jesus do to Peter? He said, now you're ready. Now you're ready. Feed my sheep. Love my people. And that's where the Lord is going to take us. Are we ready? Do we see our need for Jesus? Do we see his provision in us? Do we see how much he paid for us and how much he has given to us? That is a journey worth going on. And as a journey, we want to continually go on here. Okay. Amen. Amen.