

# Sent Out with a Purpose

John 20:19-31

1 John 1:1-2:2



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In his book *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, the late writer Oliver Sacks describes a rather unusual neurological case. Referred to him was Dr. P., a distinguished musician who, though his eyesight worked perfectly well, suffered from a pathology that manifested itself in the inability to judge the particular, concrete, and personal in what he saw. He saw everything instead in abstraction, sensitive only to structural elements of line and contours. Unable to see faces, for example, Dr. P., while walking past water hydrants and parking meters, might pat their heads, mistaking them to be the heads of children. From time to time, he might also begin to converse with carved knobs on furniture, only to be surprised when there was no response. Ready to leave his first meeting with Oliver Sacks, Dr. P. started to look around for his hat. He reached out his hand and took hold of his wife's head. He tried to lift it off and to put it on. "He had," Oliver Sacks writes, "apparently mistaken his wife for a hat!"

Due to circumstances beyond his control, Oliver Sacks was not able to follow Dr. P.'s case and therefore was unable to diagnose the pathology behind Dr. P.'s inability to judge what he saw. The furthest he got was to ascertain that, while Dr. P. was able to see structural features of a face, he was unable to see the whole face, much less the whole person. As Oliver Sacks explains, even when he approached the faces of those who were near and dear to him, he was not able to behold them. He did not see them as a "thou." There was no trace of personal recognition.

In all his professional years, Oliver Sacks did not come across a medical explanation for what he observed in Dr. P. In his reading, however, he did come across similar cases in which other patients had lost the ability to recognize the faces of people familiar to them, of spouses, children, and even themselves, except by some prominent feature, such as a large mole or a large nose.

In the stories we read about Jesus' resurrected appearances, it seems that those who were closest to Jesus - Mary Magdalene and Jesus's disciples - are unable at first to recognize him. It is as though something prevents them from knowing what they are seeing when they lay their eyes on him. At the tomb, it is not until Mary hears him call her by name that she recognizes that it is Jesus who is speaking to her. When Jesus joins his disciples in the locked room where they are gathered, it is not until they see his hands and sides marked by the nails that had pierced him that they know who he is.

In their case, perhaps Jesus is unrecognizable to them because he has been physically altered. Given all he has suffered, it would be understandable for Jesus not to be recognizable. He is not the same as he was before.

Or perhaps their grief and fear get in the way of their knowing whom they see. Having been terrorized by Jesus's crucifixion, the disciples are huddled away likely in fear, fear that they may be persecuted by religious authorities in the same way Jesus had been or fear that they could be accused of having taken Jesus's body from the tomb. Behind locked doors, they are keeping their heads down and staying out of sight. It would be understandable that their fear and grief prevent them from recognizing their lord.

While in this frame of mind, they are visited by Jesus resurrected. He seeks them out. Walking right through their locked doors, Jesus enters the room and greets them, saying "Peace be with you." Even so, the disciples fail to recognize him. They recognize their lord only when they see his wounded body.

The peace that Jesus announces in the Gospel of John is more than a greeting typical in the biblical tradition. In the Gospel of John, Jesus's peace is a gift meant to put the disciples in a new frame of mind. If the

disciples are not going to remain behind locked doors forever, if, after a time of grieving and licking their wounds, they are going to carry on, they will need this new frame of mind. It seems that here, in this story, the resurrected Jesus has sought out his disciples, penetrating their locked down mentality, in order to send them out into the world.

This is John's version of Pentecost, when Jesus breathes the Spirit upon his disciples and commissions the church into being. It is at Pentecost that disciples turn into apostles. No longer to follow, they are sent out on a mission. "Peace be with you," says Jesus. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

Listen now to the very next thing that Jesus says to them: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Being sent out into the world, the apostles are equipped, according to John, with the power to forgive. Of all the things with which to be equipped, Jesus equips them with the power to forgive.

"Who can forgive sins but God alone?" According to the gospels, this was the question that the scribes and Pharisees began to think to themselves whenever they had heard Jesus say, "Friend, your sins are forgiven." It was astounding to them that anyone other than God could exercise forgiveness. And now, imagine how much more astounding it is when Jesus commissions regular people with the power to forgive sins. Just as Jesus had the power to forgive, now they do too.

It is in this Pentecost story that the church finds its mission. From behind closed doors, we are sent out to be a forgiving presence in the world. Did you know that? Did you think our job was something else than that, something more elaborate or strategic than that? To be a forgiving presence - that is first and foremost our calling, because Christ knows that forgiveness is the only thing that will save the world. No heroism on our part, no strategic planning, no campaign of any kind will save the world. Forgiveness is what we most need to contend with a world that is sinful.

Perhaps you have noticed that I have been preaching frequently about forgiveness. It just keeps coming up Sunday after Sunday in our lectionary texts. Forgiveness was what enabled us to move from Good Friday to Easter Sunday; forgiveness was what enabled Jesus to raise all of humanity with him; and now, forgiveness is the church's commission.

That forgiveness is what we have been sent out to do and to witness in the world is something of a revelation to me. For too long I think I had privatized forgiveness. I had tucked it into a private realm, as though forgiveness were something to struggle with privately, in my private life, in my close relationships. To be sure, forgiveness is required in our private lives; we all struggle to forgive those who are closest to us. The Gospel of John reminds us, however, that forgiveness is required in the public realm too.

What would it be like, if we thought about our role in the world as being a forgiving presence? What could the world be like, if we taught forgiveness, bore witness to forgiveness, told stories of forgiveness, encouraged forgiveness, helped to cultivate conditions for forgiveness?

For this Jesus came into the world. Forgiveness was Jesus's full-time preoccupation. Unfortunately, I don't hear about forgiveness from anyone other than Jesus. There is not even the faintest whisper of forgiveness being spoken at any of the world's fault lines, in any of society's conflicts. Even the church seems to be otherwise occupied, as though we have some other higher, purer, more righteous, or more effective calling.

And yet, being a forgiving presence, in private and in public, is our work to do. And we can do it. Everyone has been equipped by Christ and empowered by the Spirit to forgive. Thank goodness for that, because only through forgiveness can we be in true fellowship with God, with Christ, and with one another, a fellowship in which we are recognizable, in which our whole selves can be known. Despite our sin, there is no need to take cover from exposure or hide in shame, as Adam and Eve tried to do. Because forgiven, we are clothed anew in Christ and we live in Christ's gentle light.