

Sermon Preached by The Reverend Jonathon W. Jensen, Rector
Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
The Third Sunday of Easter, Year B
April 19, 2015

Luke 24:36b-48

“Alan Lewis is pretending to be a Christian.” That’s the title of today’s sermon. Alan is our extremely talented and faithful director of music here at Calvary who has a wonderful sense of humor. He is a good husband, father, colleague and friend - but he is most definitely pretending to be a Christian. He has voluntarily been brought low so we might all be lifted up. I have his permission to reveal this deep, dark secret to the congregation. Rather than focus on the sins of Alan, which are legion, let me provide an illustration to enter into the spirit of our Gospel.

As a gift one year, my wife Natalie bought me a dartboard. A few rounds of darts are just monotonous enough to be meditative. If darts aren’t your thing you can substitute many other disciplines - learning to knit or cook or learning almost any sport or musical instrument. The basic idea is the same. There are lots of new things to learn all at once. Within a general framework - the individual is free to implement them to achieve the desired aim with his own technique. That is similar to the Christian life.

In the dart world there is a certain form, breathing, follow through, repetition of movement, a development of muscle memory. All work in harmony to achieve the desired outcome - to hit the target consistently. With enough practice they become not second but one’s first nature. I am not very good at the game - but like Alan and his Christian life - I am pretending to be.

A new player has the awkwardness of trying to keep all these novel pieces together at the same time. The first thing to go, and probably the most important, is **aim**. With all the enthusiasm of a recent convert - the new player just chucks it at the board hoping to hit something.

Aiming, knowing what your target is and focusing on it, is essential to success. What does this have to do with the Christian life? In your life of faith, do you have a target for which you aim? Or, like the new player, do you just do as many “religious” things as possible and hope to hit something? We come to worship, pray, study the Scriptures, engage in good works - but what is our purpose? It is to be like Christ in all things so you cannot tell where Christ ends and you begin. It becomes not our second nature but our primary nature. To be Christlike as our aim - also gives us a glimpse into that quality of life that Alan is pretending to have.

How do we know if our aim is true so we can consistently hit the target? A helpful diagnostic tool in this practice bears the name of sin. We're not talking here about human peccadilloes or the state of alienation from God as a result of the Fall. Sin, in the biblical sense, is a simple concept. The Greek word for sin is "Hamartia." Aristotle used it to describe the fall of the tragic hero. Sin literally means to "miss the mark" for which you are aiming - to be *off* target.

What does all this have to do with our Gospel reading from Luke? This scene occurs after the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. The women at the tomb, who had gone to anoint Jesus' body, had told the disciples that the Lord had risen. Later, two disciples on the road to Emmaus met the risen Christ. In the story we read today, those two disciples were telling the others about their encounter. They could not make sense of what they had experienced.

In the midst of them, Jesus appeared. They were terrified thinking they were looking at a ghost. They couldn't believe it. They had spent the last few years of their life with direction and purpose by following Christ. And then, in one day, all that was taken from them.

Into that sense of being lost, aimless, Jesus returned and gave them their new purpose. Put aside, for a moment, doubts about a bodily resurrection. The disciples had trouble believing that, too. If you get lost in that - you will miss what he said. If the bodily resurrection means anything - it is that Christ is real and present. He was real and present to them and can be to us.

What we read today are some of the last words Jesus said to the disciples before he ascended into Heaven. These last words are the ones Christ wants his disciples then and now to remember. It is a farewell speech - his parting words. You are witnesses to these things... all he said, did, and taught. You are to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins to all people.

Sin is missing the mark for which we aim. It is not helpful to try just to avoid sins but to *aim* for *something*. It's like saying I want to avoid every spot on the board or every key on the piano except for that one. It is hard to improve if you focus on every potential mistake rather than learn what you are aiming for and how to hit it consistently. Repentance is the way to get back on target when we miss. To repent, in the biblical sense, is a simple concept. To repent assumes you know what you have aimed at and when you have missed. To repent - means to stop, turn around, and aim in the right direction. Repentance gives us a new focus.

Christ's message is *not* that God condemns us for missing the mark. Sin is a diagnostic tool. Repentance and forgiveness allow us to know the true aim and purpose of our life

which is found in being in communion with God by becoming like Christ. If that is our aim, how do we consistently hit the target? How do we put our worship, prayer, Bible study, and good works together, integrate them, to be more like the one we profess to follow? As an example of how to do this - we end where we began with Alan Lewis who is pretending to be a Christian.

There is a story called the Happy Hypocrite written in 1897. The protagonist is a British Nobleman named Lord George Hell. George Hell was a man who liked to gamble a lot, drink a lot, and chase a lot of women. Generally speaking, these are not considered very holy or helpful actions. George Hell even had a lover in London. One night at a show he saw another woman, a young dancer, and immediately fell madly in love with her.

Lord George proposed marriage to the young girl... but she said that she would *only* marry a man with the face of a **saint**. This left George confused and despondent. While he was many things, he certainly was *not* holy - so he **pretended** to be. He purchased a mask with the face of a saint and had it fitted over the top of his own. He then proposed to the girl and she accepted.

Lord Hell started to act the part of the new role he had taken on. He made a total turnaround in his behavior - an example of repentance if there ever was one. He even signed the marriage register as "George Heaven." The newly repentant man made good on his past offences and started a new life out in the country with his new bride.

On the one month celebration of their marriage, the new George Heaven's ex-lover showed up demanding to see his **true** face. She wanted to expose the charlatan for what he was. A scuffle ensued with his mask being torn off. His new wife, who would *only* marry a saint, made a startling discovery. The mask he wore now matched his **real** face perfectly. In pretending to be a saint, George Hell had indeed become George Heaven.

To be *like* Christ we **act like** Christ and **assume** this new identity - the new birth we are given in baptism. To become like Jesus we put **on** Jesus so it becomes our first nature. To become virtuous, act virtuously. To become a saint, act like one. Alan, or *Saint Lewis* as we like to call him, is pretending to be a Christian and does it exceptionally well. I am still trying. So we all are. Until we get it right and don't need to pretend anymore. Amen.

Note: To be clear, Alan Lewis is the finest musician in the Church I know. He is also one of my best friends. He may be pretending to be a Christian but we all are. He just does it better than most.

The Happy Hypocrite was written by Max Beerbohm in 1897.