

Recognizing Jesus in Our Suffering

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But Stephen, enabled by the Holy Spirit, stared into heaven and saw God’s majesty and Jesus standing at God’s right side. He exclaimed, “Look! I can see heaven on display and the Human One standing at God’s right side!” At this, they shrieked and covered their ears. Together, they charged at him, threw him out of the city, and began to stone him. The witnesses placed their coats in the care of a young man named Saul. As they battered him with stones, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, accept my life!” Falling to his knees, he shouted, “Lord, don’t hold this sin against them!” Then he died.

Acts 7:55-60

I take refuge in you, Lord. Please never let me be put to shame. Rescue me by your righteousness! Listen closely to me! Deliver me quickly; be a rock that protects me; be a strong fortress that saves me! You are definitely my rock and my fortress. I entrust my spirit into your hands; you, Lord, God of faithfulness—you have saved me. Bless the Lord, because he has wondrously revealed his faithful love to me when I was like a city under siege! When I was panicked, I said, “I’m cut off from your eyes!” But you heard my request for mercy when I cried out to you for help. All you who are faithful, love the Lord! The Lord protects those who are loyal, but he pays the proud back to the fullest degree. All you who wait for the Lord, be strong and let your heart take courage.

Psalm 31

“Don’t be troubled. Trust in God. Trust also in me. My Father’s house has room to spare. If that weren’t the case, would I have told you that I’m going to prepare a place for you? When I go to prepare a place for you, I will return and take you to be with me so that where I am you will be too. You know the way to the place I’m going.” Thomas asked, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus answered, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you have really known me, you will also know the Father. From now on you know him and have seen him.” Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father; that will be enough for us.” Jesus replied, “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been with you all this time? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Don’t you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words I have spoken to you I don’t speak on my own. The Father who dwells in me does his works. Trust me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or at least believe on account of the works themselves. I assure you that whoever believes in me will do the works that I do. They will do even greater works than these because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask for in my name, so that the Father can be glorified in the Son. When you ask me for anything in my name, I will do it.

John 14:1-14

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We come to the final week of this Eastertide series, Recognizing Jesus. In these weeks after Easter, we have followed the disciples as they tried to make sense of what had happened, and one of the most consistent threads has been how often they did not recognize Jesus when he was near. They were not strangers to him. They had walked with him, listened to him, trusted him, and still found themselves unsure of what they were seeing. In the first week, we saw recognition take shape through reconciliation and forgiveness, where Jesus restores relationship. In the second week, recognition came at the table, not through explanation or knowledge, but through shared bread and familiar practice. Last week, the lens widened to community, where the life of the risen Christ became visible in a people who shared, prayed, and cared for one another in ways that stood out from the world around them. Each of those moments showed that recognition is real, but it does not happen on our terms, and it often comes in way we would not have thought.

This week takes us into a place that is more difficult to talk and think about, and often easier to avoid. I'm talking about recognizing Jesus in our suffering. That is not where most of us instinctively look. When life feels steady, when things are working, when relationships are intact, it is easier to speak about the presence of Christ. Suffering interrupts that. It unsettles what we assumed would hold. It narrows attention and, at times, pulls us inward. It can make even familiar faith feel uncertain. Suffering raises questions that do not come with quick or satisfying answers, and it exposes how much of our spiritual imagination depends on things going reasonably well. So, it's not surprising that we often assume that if Christ is present, suffering should be removed as quickly as possible.

Our scriptures, however, don't support that. They don't deny suffering or rush to resolve it. One of the more striking features of the resurrection accounts is that Jesus is not presented as someone who has simply left suffering behind as though it never happened. When he appears to the disciples, those wounds remain. They are carried into resurrection. That detail helps shape how we understand recognition. The presence of Christ is found in places marked by vulnerability, loss, and endurance. The risen life of Jesus does not erase what has happened.

I think that runs against how many of us have been formed to think about life. We are shaped by a world that values control, efficiency, and resolution. Problems are meant to be fixed. Pain is meant to be minimized. There is an expectation that with enough effort, enough knowledge, or enough resources, most difficulties can be managed or overcome. When that expectation meets suffering that cannot be quickly resolved, something begins to strain. Faith can feel unstable, not because Christ has withdrawn, but because we are looking for him in ways that no longer match the reality in front of us.

There is also a quieter layer to suffering that does not always show up in obvious ways. Not all suffering is dramatic or visible. Some of it is carried privately. Some of it settles into daily

life in ways that are difficult to describe. There are forms of exhaustion that do not have a clear cause, grief that lingers without resolution, anxiety that moves beneath the surface, and disappointments that reshape how people move through the world. These experiences don't always draw attention, and they are often easy to overlook, even within communities that care deeply about one another. Recognizing Christ in suffering requires attentiveness not only to what is obvious, but to what is hidden, to the burdens that are carried quietly and the struggles that are not easily named. It asks something of us that is deeper than quick awareness. It asks for patience, for attentiveness, and for a willingness to remain present even when there is nothing obvious to fix.

The early church did not avoid that tension. The Book of Acts does not describe a community that suddenly lived without hardship because they believed in the resurrection. They still faced opposition, uncertainty, loss, and internal conflict. Their lives were not simplified in every direction. What changed was how they lived in the middle of those realities. They did not become people who could explain everything away. They became people who stayed with one another. They prayed together, ate together, and carried one another's needs. The presence of Christ became visible not through the removal of suffering, but through the way suffering was no longer faced in isolation.

That kind of life would have stood out in the ancient world. In the cities of the Roman Empire, social life was organized around hierarchy and obligation. You cared for your household, your clients, your patrons. Those outside of it often remained outside. The early church crossed those lines. People of different backgrounds, different resources, and different social standing were drawn into shared life. They did not erase every distinction overnight, but they began to relate to one another in ways that did not depend solely on status or advantage. That meant suffering could no longer be neatly contained within one person's life. It became something the community responded to together.

I think there is a notable difference between explaining suffering and accompanying someone through it. Explanation seeks resolution. It tries to account for what has happened in a way that brings closure. Accompaniment shoots for something else. It remains present without requiring the situation to be solved. It allows grief to exist without rushing it. It allows silence to exist without filling it too quickly. It creates a space where someone does not have to hold everything alone. The Church is drawn far more often into accompaniment through suffering than into explanation of it, and I think it's in that shared presence that recognition begins to take shape.

We see that pattern in the life of Jesus. He does not consistently answer the question of why suffering occurs. He does not provide a framework that removes every uncertainty. But he does draw near. He touches those who have been pushed to the edges. He eats with those who have been excluded. He weeps with those who are grieving. He remains present in ways that do not depend on having the right words at the right time. That presence continues in the life of the Church, often in forms that do not call attention to themselves.

It looks like sitting quietly in a hospital room, not because we know what to say, but because we refuse to leave. It looks like a meal served without any attachment. It looks like a conversation that is not rushed to a conclusion. It looks like people who remain when it would be easier to withdraw. It looks like a community that notices when someone is missing and takes the time to reach out. These are not dramatic actions, but they are not small. They are ways in which Christ becomes visible in the middle of suffering, not as a force that removes it, but as a presence that refuses to abandon.

I also want to caveat this with saying that recognizing Jesus in suffering does not mean that suffering is good. It does not mean that pain is something to be desired, explained away, or treated as spiritually necessary. The Church does not celebrate loss, illness, grief, or injustice.

The witness of the Gospel is not that these things are insignificant. It is that they don't determine the final meaning of a life.

Christ enters into suffering, not as its cause, but as one who refuses to let it define the end of the story. That presence is often recognized not in isolation, but in community. The same themes we have followed throughout this series begin to converge here. Reconciliation happens among people who have been wounded. The table gathers people who are not whole. Community exists because people need one another. Suffering becomes one of the places where Christ is recognized because it is one of the places where people are drawn into deeper forms of shared life. The thread that has been running through this entire series is still here. Jesus is present, but not always where we first look, and recognition grows as our expectations are reshaped.

When the Church lives this way, something becomes visible that does not require explanation in advance. The world may not use the language of resurrection, but it recognizes when people refuse to abandon one another. It recognizes when care extends beyond convenience. It recognizes when hope persists without being forced. These are lived realities that point beyond themselves to the presence of Christ.

This is where I hope this series comes together in a comprehensive way. Each week has shown a different place where recognition happens, and none of them exist without the others. Reconciliation opens the door to restored relationship. The table gathers people into shared life. Community sustains that life over time. Suffering reveals whether that community will remain present when life becomes difficult. Taken together, they describe a way of life shaped by the risen Christ, one that is steady enough to hold both joy and sorrow without losing its center.

And that brings us here, to this table. Because if there is one place where all of this comes together, it is here. This is where reconciliation is practiced. This is where strangers become companions. This is where community is not an idea but a shared act. And this is where suffering is not ignored or explained away, but brought forward and held in the presence of Christ. We come carrying what is unfinished, what is heavy, what is unclear, trusting that Christ meets us here in ways we may only recognize over time.

At this table, we are given bread that is broken and a cup that is outpoured. The signs themselves do not hide suffering. They reveal it. And yet they are also signs of life, of presence, of a love that does not let go. The same Christ we have been tracing through this series is present here, as a gift to receive.

So we come as we are. Not because we have it all figured out. Not because we can name every person and place Jesus has been present. We come because he has invited us, and because this is one of the places where recognition continues to unfold. And it may be, as it was for those first disciples, that we fully recognize him when the bread is broken. Amen.