

A familiar stranger

By [Beth Merrill Neel](#)

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We were just about to enter the sanctuary with the paschal light when the pastor carrying the Christ candle turned around and said in a stage whisper, “Aaron is here.” At first I thought he’d said, “Karen is here,” which I already knew—she came to church on Easter even though her mother had died two days before. I must have had a weird look on my face because he said again, “Aaron is here.” And I knew that our second Easter service of the day would now be up for grabs.

Aaron is a familiar stranger around our church, a man who is in his forties, maybe, who struggles with addiction and schizophrenia and homelessness. He shows up now and then during the week, sometimes on Sundays, and then we don’t see him for months, or even a year, and then he makes his way back to us.

So as I processed in behind the acolytes, my brain started going into overdrive. Some of our regular folks would want us to invite him to leave. Some of our regular folks would insist that he stay. Who knows what the Chreasters or the first-timers would think. During the passing of the peace, he moved from the side transept to the front row. He had plucked a big daffodil from somewhere, and it was pinned to his big winter coat.

We have a tradition of using dyed Easter eggs for the children’s time, and at the end, Aaron asked the pastor leading that part of the service for an egg, which he promptly ate—who knows when the last time was that he had a decent meal. And then that pastor sat with him, and stayed with him for the rest of the service, offering comfort and community.

Aaron gave me a few chuckles and a few amens during the sermon, and during the prayers he waved his stocking cap at the joys and and moaned “mercy, mercy” during the concerns. The pastor sitting with him was deeply kind; Aaron considers him a friend.

Just before the offering, I started to imagine Aaron as one of the disciples. If I had seen Jesus die and then saw him again, I would doubt my sanity, or I might self-

medicate. Who was I to judge this man? I don't know all that has happened to him in his lifetime, what he has suffered, how many rejections he has known, what it's like to live with schizophrenia. Maybe his joy at our joys and his cries for mercy at our concerns was the most authentic response of the day.

When the offering plate came by, Aaron dug deep into his pockets, and dropped into the plate what little he had—a crumpled bill, some loose change. If that doesn't stop you short, I don't know what will.

At the end of the service, the other pastor walked out with Aaron, and gave him some money and encouraged him to find some lunch. "Most of the places around here won't let me in anymore," he said. "Maybe Subway will."

It was an Easter I will not soon forget. I wonder if the risen Christ visited us anew.

And in the days after, this prayer (author unknown) has stayed with me:

*O Christ, our familiar stranger,
You meet us on our way, and will not let us go.
As we wrestle with your truth, give us your unfathomable blessing,
So that, washed in love, we may lose our fears, and draw closer to you.*

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