

My friends and I pass books back and forth. If there is a book we enjoy, we'll pass it on when we're done with it. One of my friends sent me a book a few weeks back. I read it and enjoyed it. I asked her how she had heard of it and she said she had picked it out because of the cover. Even though we know you shouldn't judge books by their covers, she did. And it does have a nice cover.

We do it all the time.

When we're judging THINGS because of their packaging, that is one thing. We're usually the ones to suffer for bad judgment—occasionally a great book cover doesn't mean a great story on the pages.

But when we judge people by their packaging, we enter into a whole different problem. Because people's lives can be on the line. Appearances can keep people from getting jobs. They can keep people from making friends or being accepted in a community. Skin color, accents, behaviors, religion, sexual orientation, and political beliefs are examples of 'book covers' we use to judge others.

Last week, the youth who preached spoke about the masks they feel they have to wear in the world so that they can make it through. But here, in church, is the place they can let their masks down. Here's the place they don't need deceptive packaging to make sure they'll be accepted. Here they can be themselves.

Many of you have seen the video circulating on the web of Susan Boyle, a Scottish church lady who is a contestant on Britain's Got Talent. I'm going to show it to you this morning. Whether or not you've seen it already, I invite you to pay particular attention to the judges and to their reactions and their comments.

(You can watch the video by typing "Susan Boyle Britain's Got Talent" at www.youtube.com)

This is the clearest illustration I've seen in a while of people's judgments and preconceptions being proved so wrong. And I especially appreciate the humility with which two of the judges acknowledge their error, and the error of the crowd.

Our scripture passage this morning made me think of books and their covers, masks, and judging by appearances.

Two followers are walking to Emmaus, talking about the crucifixion of Jesus, which they had seen, and the stories of his resurrection appearances, which they had not seen.

Somehow, on the road, Jesus joins them, but "their eyes were kept from recognizing him".

He asks them what they are talking about and they look at him like he's been hiding under a rock. "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?"

Our two followers will have another chance to provide better hospitality later in the story, and they will, but they aren't off to a good start, are they?

“What things?”, he asks.

Listen to what their answer says about their perceptions of who Jesus is: “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. And besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place.

“And, I know this is almost to ridiculous to repeat, but some women from our group told us this crazy story. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, (I know this is crazy, right?) who said that he was alive. So some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they didn’t see him. So I’m sure there’s a logical explanation, somewhere.”

Quite a story. How’d you like to have to tell that story to a stranger you meet on the road? How much confidence would you have to repeat the women’s story?

And did you notice what they called Jesus?

A **prophet**. That much they are willing to claim about him. A prophet mighty in word and deed. And then they move from what they were willing to claim about him to what they had **hoped** to claim about him. They hoped he would be the one to redeem Israel.

You can get a sense that the followers, in the immediate aftermath of Easter, were really trying to reconcile their hopes and their preconceptions with the unfolding reality.

As Jesus was on trial, were they sitting in the bleachers, waiting for him to rise up? But then he didn’t, so they followed him to the cross, thinking, this will be the moment. But then he dies. Many of their hopes must have died in those moments. But maybe they thought of his healings, his miracles, and decided to sit tight and wait, to see what might yet happen.

But then 3 days pass. Three days was the magic number because the soul might stick around for a day or two, but by day three, the soul would have moved on. Death is final by the Third Day.

What were they to hope for by the third day?

But the post-resurrection Jesus is tired of trying to explain things to the disciples. “Oh, how foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and **then** enter into his glory?!!!!”

They still don’t know who he is, but they have the sense to keep their mouths shut and to listen to him as he interprets the last 3 days in light of the scriptures.

And then, proving the point that hospitality is ALWAYS a good idea, they invite Jesus to join them for the night. And it is while they are at table, as the bread is blessed and broken, that their eyes were open and they recognized him.

He vanishes at that moment, but they, like Simon Cowell, the third judge in the video, start talking like they knew to whom they were talking the whole time. “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us?”

And they turn around and immediately head back to Jerusalem. This is a story that must be told.

And as they are telling the rest of the disciples the good news, Jesus appears again. “Peace be with you.” And they were startled and terrified.

God bless them. One minute witnessing. The next minute startled and terrified.

Poor, terrified disciples.

But Jesus is done with that. "Why are you frightened?!! And why do doubts arise in your hearts?!!"

This next section has stuck with me this week. The disciples had been using their preconceptions and their own ideas to understand who Jesus was. And he calls them on it, again and again. He gives them information that should have allowed them to really see who he was, to get past the cover, the masks they were trying to put on him. But that doesn't work either. On one level, the Emmaus disciples understood enough to run back to Jerusalem, but not enough to get past their doubts. They are still startled and terrified. So, then he takes them back to their senses. LOOK at my hands and feet. SEE. TOUCH me and see. Watch me EAT this fish. LISTEN to my voice.

It is as if Jesus is saying, **please judge this book by its cover. Use your senses people! Our senses, which fail us in so many ways, are the final tool toward understanding here.** Finally, once they have SEEN, and TOUCHED, HEARD, then he is able to open their minds to understand the scriptures and to make them witnesses.

We, of course, can't see, touch, or hear Jesus.

But I do have some ideas about what our senses have to do with our faith. Yesterday, at the presbytery meeting, we voted on some amendments to the Constitution of the church, some changes for our Book of Order. One of the amendments involved language about ordaining people to the offices of Elder, Deacon, and Minister. Had the vote passed, we would have been affirming more inclusive language, opening the door for faithful gay and lesbian Christians to be ordained. But the amendment failed.

Many of us were sad. Are sad. Will be sad. Because we know people, we love people, we are related to people who still do not have full inclusion in the church.

And I started thinking about our senses. Because as people were speaking for and against the amendment, it occurred to me that the arguments against full inclusion are very impersonal. Their arguments were about Leviticus and mine were about the people I know and love. Don't get me wrong. I take scripture very seriously. It is God's word to us, and if there is interest, I'd be happy to lead a study on what the scriptures mean when they make reference to sexuality so that we can have some conversations about this topic.

But just as the disciples wanted the scriptures to mean something else about what it meant for Jesus to be the Messiah, so too do some people want to use scripture to keep people from full participation in the church. I think Jesus is telling the disciples and telling us that you can't understand the scriptures if you don't square them with your experience.

Experience isn't everything. But it has to count for something.

We are called to be witnesses. All that we have seen and heard and experienced. We need to pray that God will open our minds so we may have understanding.

Let's return to the Susan Boyle video clip for a moment. This video clip has been viewed more than a hundred million times. It has clearly captured our attention for one reason or another.

Tom Bergeron, who hosts *Dancing With the Stars*, has an OpEd piece in the NY Times this morning, commenting on the Susan Boyle phenomenon.

"Ms. Boyle's experience seems to suggest that people are willing to overcome their prejudices and see the world anew. The real problem is that too often we don't have the

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courage to sustain wonder. Susan Boyle walked onto that stage and faced down a sea of smug. We need that kind of courage nowadays, and not just on reality shows. We need the courage to believe that stirring voices can be found in unlikely places.”

Friends, we need to sustain wonder and live in hope. This week, I invite you to keep your senses awake. To pray that God will open our minds to understand the scriptures and to understand each other. Let us use our senses to see, touch, and hear God in unlikely places this week. Amen.