

Let's call this appearance of the risen Christ - a close encounter.
Let's think about what happened - and the context in which it happens.

When I began to prepare this message –
I read the scripture quickly and got a picture in my mind.
I pictured this encounter to be on a beach.
The disciples were grilling fish somewhere on a beach.
It was late afternoon – I could smell the grill, the coals, and even the cooking fish.
And - Jesus just appears there with them.

Well - that could have been the case – but it does not tell us that.
It simply says that Jesus appeared to them and said, "Peace be with you"

at a time when they had certainly not been feeling peaceful.

Jesus is appearing to his disciples and telling them something. That is the content.
But the context is – how this all fits into the Hebrew scriptures – which all the disciples knew.
The disciples could make sense of what was happening because of the ancient writings.



But - the purpose of the story
was surely to communicate what a powerful presence Jesus was -
how different and amazing he was -
and how he must have – how surely he bore the image of God.
How surely he must be the messiah they had all waited for.



John Spong reminds us that these first generation followers
looked at Jesus through the eyes of Yom Kippur - the Day of Atonement -
where a sacrificial lamb was always offered for the sins of the people.
This is where we get the term "lamb of God."
It was their language for how God related to the world and what people needed to do.

The writer placed the story in a context people could understand – their worldview.
Otherwise - it would not have made sense.



Let's think about now –
and how sometimes we have moments - experiences
that just seem to be laced with the presence of something too strange -
to be anything but God.

Sometimes it is a coincidence – sometimes it is a fresh insight –
a sudden rush of love for all that is about you.
Sometimes we call it a “thin space.”
The disciples were having one of those moments – those close encounters.
This is the way they described it – what we read today.

Or - it may be the way someone else described it later from what he had heard -
so that we have it before us now -
“Peace be with you” – when everyone was anything but peaceful.

Think about your close encounters – your God moments.
Were they peaceful – in non-peaceful times? What were they like?
Did they contain some kind of assurance?



I want to share with you another encounter
another God moment – a close encounter
and the context in which it happens – is very different – but I hope you will see
what I mean by encounter and context.

Elizabeth Gilbert's best selling book, *Eat, Pray, Love* opens with this scene.
Let's listen for the context – and that context is that she is a newcomer to prayer.
I will read a few paragraphs from *Eat, Pray, Love*.

“This part of my story is not a happy one - I know.
But I share it here because something was about to occur
on that bathroom floor that would change forever the progression of my life -

What happened was that I started to pray.
You know – like - to God.
Now, this was a first for me.
And since this is the first time I have introduced
that loaded word – God – into my book -
and since this is a word which will appear many times again throughout these pages,
it seems only fair that I pause here for a moment to explain
exactly what I mean when I say that word -
just so people can decide right away how offended they need to get.

Let me first explain why I use the word God
when I could just as easily use the words Jehovah, Allah, Shiva, Brahma, Vishnu or Zeus.
Alternatively - I could call God “That” - which is how the ancient Sanskrit scriptures say it -
and which I think comes close to the all-inclusive and unspeakable entity -
I have sometimes experienced.

But “That” feels impersonal to me – a thing, not a being -
and I myself cannot pray to a That.
I need a proper name – in order to fully sense a personal attendance.”¹

So she is giving us the context for this God encounter – this close encounter.

“What I said to God through my gasping sobs was something like this:
“Hello, God. How are you? I’m Liz. It’s nice to meet you.”
That’s right – I was speaking to the creator of the universe
as though we’d just been introduced at a cocktail party.

But we work with what we know in this life -
and these are the words I always use at the beginning of a relationship.
“I’m sorry to bother you so late at night” - I continued.

“But I’m in serious trouble.
And I’m sorry I haven’t ever spoken directly to you before,
but I do hope I have always expressed ample gratitude
for all the blessings that you’ve given me in my life.

This thought caused me to sob even harder.
God waited me out.

I pulled myself together enough to go on:

I don’t know what to do. I need an answer. Please tell me what to do.
The prayer narrowed itself down to that simple entreaty.
Please tell me what to do.

Until – quite abruptly – it stopped.

Quite abruptly - I found that I was not crying anymore.

I'd stopped crying, in fact, in mid-sob.

My misery had been completely vacuumed out of me.

I lifted my forehead off the floor and sat up in surprise,
wondering if I would see some Great Being who had taken my weeping away.

But - nobody was there. I was just alone.

But - not really alone - either.

I was surrounded by something I can only describe as a little pocket of silence –
a silence so rare - that I didn't want to exhale - for fear of scaring it off.

I don't know when I'd ever felt such stillness.

Then I heard a voice.

It was my own voice from within my own self.

But it was my voice as I had never heard it before.

It was perfectly wise - calm and compassionate.

This was what my voice would sound like if
I'd always experienced love and certainty in my life.

How can I describe the warmth of affection in that voice -
as it gave me the answer -

that would forever seal my faith in the divine?"

The voice said:

"Go back to bed - Liz."



Liz did not need a specific answer to her question that night.

She said that in a way –

this episode had all the hallmarks of a typical Christian conversion experience –

the dark night of the soul - the call for help -

the responding voice - the sense of transformation.

She said, "It was not a religious conversion in the traditional manner of thinking.

But it was the beginning of a conversation –

a dialogue that would – ultimately -

bring me very close to God - indeed."



I remembered Elizabeth Gilbert's words
when reading our story from Luke about the disciples surprise encounter with Jesus.

The disciples heard a word of peace - and so did Liz -
in the midst of a complicated and anxious time.
The ancient writer and the contemporary writer
wrote about close encounters – within very different contexts.



What it says to me is that our encounters with God – our spiritual experiences -
may not be what we expect them to be.
We will want to put them in one context or another.
In the Old Testament people were terrified.

Liz's encounter was not what she was expecting
and she really did not know what to expect.
But God calmed her stormy seas – her chaos – her tortured decision making -
and she could sleep.
And what happened started her on a journey of
wisdom and growth and assurance about her life.



The lesson for you and the lesson for me
may be - to not be too rigid in our expectations of how the divine
may choose to present itself in our lives.
We wouldn't want to miss the encounter -
because we have already decided what the context will be.

It may take a frame of mind that is slightly open at least
for whatever reason – and ears that can hear – something like -
“Peace be with you” – or something much more mundane like – “Go back to bed Liz.”

Think about your own close encounters – when they've happened –
times you felt the presence of God – the presence of Christ -
and how you made sense of them in your life.

Close Encounters – based on Luke 24:36b-48
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And even more – how can you draw on them
as you make meaning of the unexpected things that happen –
especially when you are just about certain that things are not going to turn out well.
Because they just might.



In closing - I want to leave you with this thought:

Sometimes the words "Peace be with you"
and the words "Go back to bed"
are just what we need to hear.

But what will be most important is how open we are
to the encounter whenever and however it happens.

So – let's be open and let's be available –
for that is what the disciples did – and that is what Liz did.
It makes a difference in how we grow in spirit and in faith.

¹ Elizabeth Gilbert. *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India, and Indonesia*.
p. 12-13.