

The Greeks came up to Philip and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” (John 12: 21).

That’s an odd way to start a scripture lesson.

It’s almost as if we opened a book in the middle and just started to read, hoping to understand the second half of the story without reading the first half.

Unfortunately this leaves us with more questions than answers.

I mean, who in the world are these Greeks, what religion are they, how do they know about Jesus in the first place, why are they in Jerusalem and why do they want to see Jesus?

And why is this story in the Gospel of John at all?

So many questions, but first thing’s first.

The Greeks that John refers to were probably diaspora Jews.

Israel has, throughout its history, been invaded and conquered many times, each time this happens, lots of Jews were pushed from their homeland and forced to set up life somewhere else.

This is the on-going Jewish diaspora.

Some political event pushed Jews out of Israel and they landed in Greece.

Now, they are back in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover.

Even before modern technology, word travelled fast when something marvelous happened, which is why these Greek Jews know about Jesus in the first place.

Word has gotten out that Jesus has just resurrected his friend Lazarus from the dead, and people want to know about this miracle worker.

But this isn't all Jesus has done, it's just the most magnificent and the most recent of his acts.

He also turned water into wine and gave a man his sight, among other things.

So, it's understandable that after all they've heard, they're finally in the same city as Jesus and they want to see him with their own eyes.

They didn't want to just be told about him, they wanted to have a personal encounter with him.

Maybe witness a miracle for themselves, or touch his cloak to see what would happen.

At least be in his presence, to see if they could feel his aura, surely something about this man must be *different*, and they wanted to cast their eyes on him so they could understand what all the fuss was about.

When I am reading the Bible, I often ask myself, okay *why* did the author think that this story or message was important enough to write down?

Why did this make it into the final manuscript?

I wonder if John included this bit about the Greek Jews because they represent all of us.

All the people who are living after Jesus' time, who don't have the opportunity to literally share space with or look at Jesus with our own eyes, these Greek Jews are all of us.

And we are the ones for whom the Gospel is written.

It wasn't written by or for the disciples, they were long gone by the time John wrote this Gospel.

But all of us who came after him, just as we don't get to have a personal audience with Jesus, the Greeks didn't either.

The challenge that the Jewish Greeks had is the same one we have today.

So, through this story, John is communicating to us how to be faithful believers without having the benefit of literally seeing.

I think that this whole religion thing that we are a part of is our feeble human attempt to put our experiences of faith into words, and to share those experiences with each other and to share in those experiences with each other.

Language is so limiting, it will never allow us full, unrestricted ability to express what it's like to have a Jesus moment, to have an encounter with the divine.

But one thing I think that we all have in common is that we have all had these fleeting encounters with Jesus, and perhaps those moments are one reason why we keep coming back to church, keep worshipping, keep staying tethered into this community.

I doubt that solely hearing about Jesus would be compelling enough to motivate someone to commit their lives, hours out of every week, dollars out of every paycheck, to be part of perpetuating a community of faith.

We have to experience Jesus, have that emotional connection to another person, that deep-beyond-words reaction to an event,

these are Jesus moments in which we encounter the divine with more than our 5 senses, something happens in our core.

You might be thinking that I am talking nonsense and that you've never had such an experience, but I know you have.

You might just use different words to describe it.

You might not call it a Jesus moment, you might call it an epiphany or you might just say that it was very moving.

Again, like I just said, language is limiting, we are trying to do our best to use words to describe something that is beyond words.

So, call it what you want, it's an encounter with the divine, and I think it's these moments that keep us connected to our faith and the church.

It's this kind of moment that the Greeks wanted to have when they said, let us see Jesus and when Thomas refused to believe that Jesus had risen until he was able to touch his wounds.

A first-hand testimony from some other human isn't enough, we want the experience for ourselves.

The good news is that we have all seen Jesus in what I call these 'Jesus moments.'

If you are still having trouble grasping what I am trying to get at, maybe some examples will help.

Back in 2004 or so, I was in high school, and my family took a summer trip to Costa Rica.

Forgive me if I have told you this story before.

I don't remember telling it, but maybe I have because it left an indelible mark on my life.

But anyways, my family is in San Jose, the capital of Costa Rica and my mom and I venture out to get food to bring back to the family at the hotel.

Well, we came across a pizza shop, so we ordered pizza.

It turned out that we had way too many pizzas, more than we needed.

As we were walking home, we passed by a homeless man who was sitting on the sidewalk.

I looked at him as we walked by, but he didn't make eye contact with me, he kept his head down.

Then after we'd walked a ways past him, arms full of pizza boxes, I stopped in my tracks.

I told my mom that I thought we should give him one of our pizzas.

It didn't feel right to be walking by with so much more than we needed, when he had so little.

Without a second thought, we both turned back to give him one.

As we leaned down, he lifted his gaze, confused at first, but once he realized what we were doing, his face lit up into a huge smile.

We weren't giving him a slice, or our leftovers, or old, cold pizza, but a piping hot, large pizza.

But what was even more extraordinary was what he did with the pizza.

After my mom and I walked away and turned a corner, I suddenly heard people talking on what had been a silent street.

So, I turned back and saw a whole group of folks crowded around this man, sharing in his pizza.

He was laughing and smiling.

Other people, presumably also homeless, had appeared from who-knows-where, and this man shared his food with them.

I hadn't done much, not nearly as much as I could have, but that moment felt so joyous, and also profound.

That was a Jesus moment that will never leave me.

Other Jesus moments that I have had are simpler than that, like watching people cross the finish line of the New York Marathon, and suddenly I find myself weeping, because I am sharing in the sense of joy and accomplishment of what they've done.

Also, seeing the looks of pain and relief on people's faces as they help, or are helped by, other runners who crossed the finish line.

Or when I watched my dear friend walk across the stage to get her college degree, something that took 8 years to get, which she thought she'd never achieve.

And I openly wept.

Another Jesus moment.

Or abiding with someone who has unexpectedly lost their mother, holding them as they grieve.

Just being present for them in their time of loss, knowing that no words will be able to ease their pain.

Jesus moment.

I share mine because I hope that they'll help to conjure up moments that you've shared, ones in which you deeply connected the awesomeness of humanity. Jesus moments.

The Greeks wanted to see Jesus, so do we, but it takes more than our eyes to see him.

In order to encounter him, we have to live with our hearts wide open.

We must be willing to experience the joyous with the painful, the high with the low, the tears of happiness and the tears of anguish.

It takes sacrifice, being willing to let go of our need for comfort and stability and composure.

That's all over-rated.

Jesus invites us to lean into our emotions so that we can share in the intensity of his last meal, of his crucifixion and his resurrection.

We are getting closer and closer to the remembrance of those days, and I encourage you to let your heart break open a little wider so that you can be immersed in the emotion of Jesus' last days, up until he was nailed to that cross and after he was resurrected from it.

Amen.