One day, a snake goes in to see the optometrist because his eyesight is failing. “It’s actually affecting my life,” he reports. “I can’t hunt anymore because I can’t see.” So, after some tests, the doctor fits the snake for glasses and the snake immediately notices an improvement in his eyesight. A week later, the doctor calls the snake to check how the glasses are holding up. “Oh, the glasses are fine,” the snake answers. “But now I’m so lonely.” … “Lonely?” the doctor asks. “How does finally being able to see make you lonely?” … “Well, once my eyesight cleared up, I realized I’ve been dating a garden hose.” +++ We rely on our ability to see clearly, don’t we? It’s how we know what’s going on around us. It’s how we understand our place in the world. But sometimes, like in the case of that snake, we just think we know what we’re seeing and that’s good enough for us – a partial answer: that thing in the grass is long, round, thin… it must be another snake. I think I’ll ask it out on a date! +++ The whole Gospel of John draws on that irony – the difference between seeing and understanding. It draws on our ability – and willingness – to look beyond what’s right before our eyes – beyond all the stuff of this physical world – to see the divine.

In John, a lot of people see Jesus. – But what do they see when they see him? – What are they prepared to believe? – They can’t break free of their own limitations as people of this world. Each person Jesus encounters is limited by what they were looking for in the first place. +++ The Pharisee, Nicodemus, is looking for someone sent by God. When he sees Jesus’ miracles (or signs as they are called in John) he believes Jesus must be from God, but that’s as far as he goes. He can’t understand what Jesus says to him about being “born from above,” or “born again” – he was just wondering about Jesus; not looking to change his own life. +++ Remember that Samaritan Woman whom Jesus meets at the well? She sees that he is kind to her and she’s amazed that he can tell her everything she has ever done. – She even thinks Jesus might be the messiah her people have been waiting for. But that’s all she’s looking for. So she can’t comprehend he might be so much more, even, than the awaited messiah. She doesn’t understand his talk about Living Water. +++ The blind man, after Jesus gives him sight, is asked what happened by the Pharisees. Well…, he says, that man “put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.” That’s all he knew, and – at first – that’s all he cared about. When the Jews continue to press him about Jesus, the man finally just shrugs, and says, well, he “must be a prophet.” He hadn’t been looking to understand about what this miracle – this sign – might be pointing to. He had just accepted the gift of eyesight. +++ Even Pontius Pilate doesn’t know what to make of Jesus when he meets him. What is he looking for? Just an excuse to do what the chief priest and Pharisees have asked him to do – to convict this rabble-rouser – So, he asks Jesus, “Are you the King of the Jews?” for purely legal reasons. But Jesus turns the question back on him personally: “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” They go back and forth until Jesus finally declares, “Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” Frustrated and defeated, Pilate can only ask, “What IS truth?” … But, he won’t follow Jesus to the truth, because the truth is not really what he’s looking for. +++ Even Thomas, one of the 12 Apostles, can’t accept that Jesus has been resurrected because he hadn’t seen it with his own eyes. After proving himself to Thomas by letting him touch the wounds on his hands and his side, Jesus tells him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Thomas hadn’t really been looking for anything more than what was plain in front of his face – He wasn’t ready to believe what he couldn’t see. +++ These are just a few of the people in John who invite us to reflect on what we find when we look at Christ. Are we really ready for Jesus Christ to be so much more, so much deeper, so much more personal and alive than we ever imagined? Are we ready to believe in him – are we ready to follow him? +++ When you encounter Jesus, what are you looking for?

In Lewis Carroll’s classic children’s book Alice in Wonderland: Alice has already seen some strange and extraordinary things, when she has an unexpected chat with a Cat… who has a habit of disappearing and reappearing. Carroll writes, Alice was “a little startled by seeing the Cheshire Cat sitting on a bough of a tree a few yards off. The Cat only grinned when it saw Alice. It looked good-natured, she thought: still… it had VERY long claws and a great many teeth, so she felt that it ought to be treated with respect… ‘Cheshire Puss.’ She began, rather timidly, as she did not at all know whether it would like the name: however, it only grinned a little wider. ‘Come, it’s pleased so far,’ thought Alice, and she went on. ‘Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?’ … ‘That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,’ said the Cat… ‘I don’t much care where,’ said Alice… ‘Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,’ said the Cat. … ‘—so long as I get SOMEWHERE,’ Alice added as an explanation… ‘Oh, you’re sure to do that,’ said the Cat, ‘if you only walk long enough.’… Alice felt that this could not be denied.” Alice has seen a lot of stuff she could never have imagined, and doesn’t know how to make sense of it – she’s been sort of wandering aimlessly. The Cheshire Cat points out that, just maybe, it would help if Alice decided where she wants to go.

In the opening chapter of John, where today’s text is found, I’d say there’s already a lot of seeing going on that people aren’t making sense of. The prologue tells us that Christ “was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the
world did not know him… He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.” +++ Then, we read today that John the Baptist admits – though HE was the one whose voice “cried out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord!’” – ++ ++ though HE had warned the Pharisees that someone is coming, and “I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” ++ Despite all of that – John admits that even HE did not recognize Jesus when he first saw him – (at least in THIS gospel that’s true). . . . . . . . . . The Holy Spirit had to help him out – did you notice that. The Spirit told him, “OK, the one the dove lands on is the Son of God.” He sees the dove land on Jesus, so he must be the one. He admits it: “I myself did not know him”. +++ And then we come to Andrew and the other, unnamed, disciple of John. They are the ones who really remind me of Alice. They are standing by the side of the road with John the Baptist, when John sees Jesus walking by exclams, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” And so, John’s two disciples start following Jesus instead. They don’t know what he’s doing… or where he might be leading them. They don’t say anything to him. +++ They see Jesus and they just start following him. And, like Alice, they have no idea what adventures lay in store for them for making that choice.

+++ ++++++++ ++++++++ ++++++++ Last week, we were in the gospel of Matthew – at the baptism of the Lord. In that version, John is amazed that Jesus would come to him to be baptized – if anything, he says, it should be the other way around. I mentioned that Jesus’ first words in Matthew were his response to John’s surprise: “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” We talked about how that first statement by Jesus sets the tone and theme for the whole Gospel of Matthew – a call to a higher form of righteousness, as Jesus Christ is washed clean of sins he never committed – taking our penance as his own. +++ ++ Well, the same thing happens in today’s reading from John. The key question in this Gospel also comes through Jesus’ first words – this time when he sees Andrew and the other disciple following him – and he turns to them, and asks: “What are you looking for?” +++ || You respond to Jesus? That’s great. || Follow him on the road a bit? Even better. || But what are you looking for?|| || It’s the same question Jesus repeats to the soldiers and police at the other end of the book – when they approach him in the garden to arrest him. Jesus doesn’t run away or hide. No, Jesus steps right up to the soldiers and police, and asks them, “Whom are you looking for?” It was not just a question for the group, but for each of the soldiers individually. “Who are… YOU …looking for?” – They say they are looking for Jesus of Nazareth – and when he responds, “I am he,” they step back and fall to the ground… They had come as a detachment of soldiers – but they each encounter Christ in their own way. +++ +++ Looking at Andrew and the other disciple, this morning Jesus asks any of us who would follow him – any of us bold enough to be his disciple: “What are you looking for?” What you hungry for?… Where does your thirst lie?… Are you looking for peace?… For forgiveness?… For acceptance?… When you reach out to Christ – what are you looking for?

+++++ ++++++++ ++++++++ ++++++++ It’s a tough question – tougher than it might seem. “What are you looking for?” +++ It’s not easy to open up and tell Christ our deepest needs. +++ So, it’s not surprising that they try to sidestep it. They answer the question with another question: Ummm… “Where are you staying?” I think that’s their way of trying to get Jesus to show his hand first. “What are we looking for?” Well, tell us where you’re going first. Maybe we’ll follow you. If we do, where will you lead us? What do you have to offer? Explain yourself to us so we can understand you and, who knows, maybe that’ll just happen to actually BE what we’re looking for.” +++ +++ +++++[“Oh, I don’t much care where [I end up],’ said Alice… ‘Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,’ said the Cat. … ]] +++ +++ But, of course, Jesus doesn’t make it so easy for us. People learn that throughout this Gospel: You can’t boil Jesus Christ, the Son of God, down to an explanation… To logic. +++ To a moment. +++ How does he answer when they ask where he’s staying? :: “Come and see.” +++ “Do you want to see where I’m going?… Come with me, and see.” +++ +++ Do YOU want to see what Jesus is all about? Follow him. Follow him all the way home and you’ll see. It’s not always easy – it’s not always clear. – But, learning to know Jesus – learning how he fits into our lives – seeing how he connects us with God – how he rescues us from the darkness of this world and offers us the light of eternity – seeing all of that happens when you follow him. +++ It’s the kind of trail that you can only see when you’re walking it and even then, you have to look up every now and then – get your bearings – and make sure you’re on the right trail. With Christ, you have to ask yourself – over and over again – “What am I looking for?” +++ And, with you, he will respond – over and over again – “Come and see.” “Come and see.” +++ “Come and see…” +++ “Get out of your comfort zone and follow me. Follow me into the community… Follow me to the hungry and homeless… Follow me to people suffering injustice… +++ Follow me in prayer… Take me on your journey… Bring me to you pain… Let me be your savior… Every day… +++ Then, you’ll know where we’re going… because we are going there together.”

Here at the beginning of Jesus ministry, as this mysterious man from Nazareth begins to tread the road that will take him to villages and towns all over Judea, healing, feeding, teaching – and eventually arriving in Jerusalem, where he will be greeted with Palm Leaves and a cross…: +++ Here at the beginning – the Good News is, he is inviting you to follow. Come and see! +++ Take the journey with him. +++ See where he leads you. +++ Find what you are looking for.

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