

APRIL 27, 2014: SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 2:42-47 I Peter 1:3-9 John 20:19-31

As I mentioned last week, in dealing with Jesus' post-resurrection appearances, it's essential to remember the distinction between the historical Jesus and the risen Jesus. His resurrection wasn't a resuscitation. Many of us falsely believe that the person who came out of the tomb on Easter Sunday morning was the same person put into the tomb on Good Friday afternoon: a 1st century CE Palestinian Jewish carpenter.

When a person rises, he or she morphs into a new creation. As Paul puts it in his letter to the Galatians, they're no longer bound by the limits which restrict non-resurrected individuals. In the case of the risen Jesus, he/she is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female.

The distinction between the historical and risen Jesus is important to readers of Scripture because our sacred authors know only the risen Jesus. Contrary to political commentator Bill O'Reilly's assertion in his two recent books on the historical Jesus, no one who experienced Jesus between 6 BCE and 30 CE. ever wrote anything down about him that we possess today. If someone actually put any of his or her reminiscences into written form, they've been lost.

That's why Jesus' gospel comment to Thomas is so significant. "Have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed." Scripture scholars are convinced this statement applies not only to readers of John's gospel, but also to the author of John's gospel. Both know only the risen Jesus.

The big question for us today is, "How do we surface the risen Jesus in our midst?"

The unknown author of I Peter believes that process has something to do with our dying and rising with Jesus. Those who imitate Jesus also go through a death and resurrection, symbolized by their being immersed and then raised up in baptismal water. They also become new creations even while they're waiting to encounter Jesus face to face, beyond how they experience him/her right here and now.

It's clear from our first and third readings that our dying and rising with Jesus has something to do with living our faith in the context of communities. As far as we can tell, there were no "Lone Rangers" in the early days of our faith. Our Christian sacred authors presume it's in the act of giving ourselves to one another that the risen Jesus becomes a tangible part of our lives. To pull that off, we have to relate to and with others on a daily basis.

Next week we'll see how that self-giving especially revolves around our frame of mind during the Eucharist. But today it's enough to reflect on Luke's ideal picture of a perfect, loving community, one in which "... all who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one's need." Such a situation only happens when a lot of people are willing to die to themselves.

It also happens in John's gospel when the risen Jesus proclaims, "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven, and whose sins you retain are retained." Forgiveness always involves a dying. If we don't forgive the sin remains, and our lack of forgiveness is added to it.

The building of Christian communities not only leads to a better world, it also leads us to experience the risen Jesus in that world.

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MAY 4, 2014: THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER
Acts 2:14, 22-23 I Peter 1:17-21 Luke 24:13-35

One of Martin Luther's most biting accusations against the Catholic Church was that it had turned the action of the Eucharist into the thing of the Eucharist.

We old-timers remember those pre-Vatican II days when, as my father often put it, we went to Mass like "bumps on a log." We didn't say anything; we didn't do anything. The priest was the whole, secretive show. We simply were expected - especially as children - to be attentive to what was quietly going on up at the altar, never to what was going on around us. The latter would be a sin. At most, we were encouraged to follow along with the priest's private prayers by using a vernacular missal. The Masses were things we attended, things which eventually would help us get into heaven - if we attended enough of them. Most people didn't even leave their pews to receive communion.

I can never mention enough the advice that Fr. Frank Murphy gave us transitional deacons in the fall of 1964, just a few months before our ordination and the beginning of the Vatican II Eucharistic reforms. "Your main job as Eucharistic presiders," the future auxiliary bishop of Baltimore insisted, "isn't just to say all the prayers correctly or perform the proper gestures; it's to form the people who are participating in the celebration into the Body of Christ." Our Christian sacred authors couldn't agree more.

Today's gospel pericope is one of the best known passages in Scripture. Yet many of us don't appreciate where Luke's going with the narrative. First of all, Luke's Jesus told his followers not to leave Jerusalem until after they'd received the Spirit. (For Luke, Jerusalem is more a theological experience than a geographic location. It symbolizes wherever and whenever Jesus and his followers suffer, die, rise, and receive the Spirit.) These two disciples - probably Mr. and Mrs. Cleopas - ignore his command and take off for Emmaus at first light on Easter Sunday. For theological purposes, the evangelist has the risen Jesus overtake them and eventually makes certain they return to Jerusalem, as all Christians must return there.

But in the meantime they experience what it means to be in the presence of the risen Jesus. Scholars agree that Luke is basically describing an early Christian Eucharist. Like our present Eucharists, they begin with the "liturgy of the word:" Jesus explains the Scriptures to them along the road. Then they continue into the "liturgy of the bread:" recognizing him during their shared meal in the breaking of the bread.

Through their interaction they surface the risen Jesus - the same interaction our sacred authors presumed would take place during every celebration of the Lord's Supper. Like Peter in our Acts passage, their becoming the Body of Christ through the breaking of bread made them "witnesses" of this unique phenomenon of Jesus and themselves being new creations. And as the author of I Peter stresses, their experience of the risen Jesus instilled in them a faith and hope unlike anyone else's faith and hope.

Of course, we learned as children that Jesus is present in the bread and wine because of the priest's words over those two elements. The priest doesn't even need anyone else to be present for that transubstantiation to take place. But we only surface the risen Jesus present in the community by the interaction of those in the community, in the giving of themselves for one another, the interaction Frank Murphy presumed we presiders would help create. Almost impossible to pull that off if we once again return to just being bumps on a log, forbidden "as church" to even talk to one another "in church."

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