

APRIL 14, 2013: THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER
Acts 5:27-32, 40b-41 Revelation 5:11-14 John 21:1-19

Johannine scholars are convinced John's gospel once ended in chapter 20. Today's pericope is from chapter 21: an addition to his original gospel. Without getting into the reasons someone tacked one more chapter onto the first 20, many of these same scholars contend that today's story of Jesus' appearing to his disciples at the Sea of Tiberias comes from one of the oldest early Christian traditions, narrating a post-resurrection appearance predating those found in Matthew and Luke, and even those in the preceding chapter 20.

When one removes the "connecting links" - words like "again" and "third time" - from the narrative, it appears Jesus' disciples, knowing nothing about his resurrection, returned to Galilee after their disastrous Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem. They sat around for some time, reminiscing about their leader, constantly bringing up their disappointment that things hadn't turned out the way they'd planned.

Eventually Peter, probably under pressure from his wife, makes the difficult decision to go back to work. (Remember, he and most of Jesus' disciples fished for a living.) Joined by six other followers of Jesus, "they went off and got into the boat."

Only after they're completely absorbed in their work - and frustrated by their lack of success - do they notice Jesus "standing on the shore." Their inability to be certain it's really Jesus is probably the evangelist's way of telling us they're experiencing the "new creation" of the risen Jesus, not the old historical Jesus. Then, making certain his readers don't miss the point, John has Jesus invite the startled fisherman to share a meal with him -the place and action in which those same readers most frequently experienced the risen Jesus.

In her workshops and classes, the doctor who did the earliest research on death and dying in the late 60s and early 70, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, always mentioned how difficult it is for us to "go back to work" after a loved one dies. We often feel that by returning to what we did while that special person was alive, we're implicitly saying, "See, even without you I can still do what I used to do when we were together. You weren't as important to me as you thought. You're dead."

Though Ross acknowledged that such a return is painful, she insisted that we still have to do it. "It's only when we finally go back to work," she observed, "that we'll experience our deceased loved one present in our everyday life in a new and meaningful way."

John, of course, knew nothing of Dr. Ross' research, but he was convinced that it's in the most common parts of our working lives that we most notice the presence of Jesus.

It would be great, like the author of Revelation, to be granted visions of angels surrounding Jesus' heavenly throne; to hear all creatures in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea sing his praises. Yet, for most of us, that's never going to happen. Neither will we ever have an opportunity, like the apostles in today's Acts passage, to dramatically proclaim his message and person in the face of great opposition.

Most of us will simply spend our lives of faith doing those ordinary things all people are expected to do. Yet, because we, like Peter, deeply love Jesus, we'll constantly be surfacing those little and big "calls" which he always extends to all his followers.

As Ross always taught, only those who eventually admit their loved one is really dead by returning to their daily work will actually experience that person alive in a new way in everything they do - even if that person happens to be Jesus of Nazareth.

Roger Vermalen Karban

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APRIL 21, 2013: FOURTH SUNDAY OF
EASTER Acts 13:14, 43-52 Revelation 7:9,14b-17
John 10:27-30

Every biblical author works from an agenda: an idea which has been spinning around in his or her head long before stylus is put to papyrus. Almost always, something has happened in the community for which they write, something which needs an answer, or at least a little clarification. As I've mentioned often before, if there is no problem, there is no scripture.

One of the major problems which Luke addresses in his double volume work (his gospel and the Acts of the Apostles) is, "Where did all these Gentiles come from?" A movement which began in the early 30s as 100 percent Jewish has, by the mid-80s, become almost 100 percent Gentile. Has this been a mistake? Had Jesus intended this drastic switch from the beginning, but played it close to the vest, sharing his plans with only a chosen few?

It's clear that some first century Jewish critics of Christianity believed the change from a Jewish to a Gentile movement had been Jesus' idea from the very start of his ministry; a way of leading faithful Jews down a road to the extinction of their religion. For them, it was part of a huge anti-Jewish conspiracy.

Luke disagrees. He acknowledges the switch in membership. But he contends this change is due not to some anti-Jewish conniving, but because Jesus' reform of Judaism was rejected by mainstream Jews.

Contradicting Paul's own appraisal of his ministry in the first chapters of Galatians, Luke, throughout Acts, has the Apostle always proclaim the faith first to Jews, then, only after their rejection, does he turn to non-Jews. We hear this Lucan methodology clearly set forward in today's Acts pericope.

Having arrived in Pisidian Antioch on their first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas first go to the local synagogue and speak about Jesus of Nazareth. Though the pair was originally well received, eventually they encounter opposition from the synagogue's leading members. At this point Paul delivers Luke's thesis: "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first, but since you reject it and condemn yourselves as unworthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles." The rest is history.

This dramatic change in evangelization led our Revelation's author to speak of a "great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation, race and people, and tongue" standing before God's heavenly throne. No longer is salvation limited to one group. Everyone can participate in the faith of Jesus.

This switch from a Jewish community to a Gentile community also helps us better understand what John is trying to convey when he speaks about Jesus as the Good Shepherd. At this point in salvation history - the mid-908 - it's the risen Jesus, not the historical Jesus who is shepherding his people. It's the risen Jesus' voice to which the sheep are listening. It's that voice which is presenting us with the will of the Father.

The historical Jesus was limited by his culture and religion. Eventually his earliest followers discovered that the risen Jesus was free of both those elements. They didn't give up evangelizing when their own people rejected their message. They simply rethought the basics of Jesus' reform, and adapted his message, making it understandable to a people he had never historically addressed.

Most of us, with a little study, can become experts on what the Good Shepherd said in the first third of the first Christian century. But it takes insight and faith to hear what the Good Shepherd is telling us in the first third of the twenty-first century. Perhaps that's why Paul, in I Corinthians 14, reminds us that prophets are an essential element in every Christian community.

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