

MARCH 27TH, 2016: EASTER SUNDAY
Acts 10:34a, 37-43 I Corinthians 5:6b-8 John 20:1-9

Every grade school morning for eight years I stared at a stain glass window depicting Jesus' resurrection. It was just above the altar on the "epistle side." The scene was obviously from Matthew's narrative of the event. Guards were strewn over the ground as the risen Jesus came majestically out of the tomb. Of course, at that time I didn't know that no one in the church had the nerve to describe Jesus' actual resurrection for hundreds of years after the event. Our evangelists narrate only the discovery of an empty tomb, messages from angels, and the risen Jesus' later appearances. Technically we have no "resurrection narratives." (When the author of the apocryphal Gospel of Peter eventually described the actual resurrection, the risen Jesus is taller than the clouds and he's carrying a "talking" cross!)

The main reason our sacred authors don't describe Jesus' resurrection was because they believed it really was a resurrection and not a resuscitation. Many of Jesus' followers today aren't familiar with such a distinction. When someone is resuscitated they return from the dead pretty much as the same person he or she was when they died. For instance, when in Luke's gospel Jesus resuscitates the widow of Nain's son, if the boy was Democrat before he died, he'd no doubt still be a Democrat after Jesus brought him back to life. He wouldn't have become a Republican.

That doesn't happen when someone is risen - or rises - from the dead. The problem is Jesus of Nazareth is the only biblical person who accomplishes that feat. As Paul reminded his communities, a risen person morphs into a "new creation." He or she is completely freed from all the limits that restrict us humans. The Apostle once pointed out to his Galatian Christians that the risen Jesus is no longer a Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. He/she's simply "other" from anyone we've ever encountered. How do you describe such a person?

The late Fr. Frank Cleary was convinced that if someone set up a camcorder outside Jesus' tomb on Easter Sunday morning, the recorded tape would simply show just a tomb on Easter Sunday morning. The risen Jesus can only be experienced by those who do what's necessary to surface such an individual.

That seems to be why, in today's Acts passage, Luke has Peter point out, "This man God raised on the third day and granted that he be visible, not to all the people, but to us, the witnesses chosen by God in advance . . ." Jesus' resurrection is obviously a matter of faith; an event only people of faith can perceive.

No wonder Paul consistently reminds his communities that they, like the historical Jesus' original followers, must experience a "metanoia:" a complete reversal of their value systems. "Clear out the old yeast," he commands his Corinthian Christians, "so that you may become a fresh batch of dough, inasmuch as you are unleavened." Jesus' resurrection not only transformed him, it also transforms us.

The three participants in John's empty tomb passage provide us with a classic example of the gradualness of this metanoia. It's rarely instantaneous. At this point of today's passage, Mary of Magdala, Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple seem to be looking for just a "removed" Jesus. "They have taken the Lord from the tomb," Mary reports, "and we don't know where they've put him." Though all three disciples eventually come to believe, John mentions, "They did not yet understand the Scripture that he had to rise from the dead."

Is it possible, on this day of all days, some of us still don't understand the Scripture that we also must rise from the dead?

APRIL 3RD, 2016: SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER
Acts 5:12-16 Revelation 1:9-11a, 12-13, 17-19 John 20:19-31

I frequently quote Fr. Ed Hays' insightful comment, "Jesus' original followers imitated him long before they worshiped him." It would seem many of his modern followers are content simply to worship him, and never think of imitating him. Yet as we know from the earliest biblical account of the Lord's Supper in I Corinthians 11, taking from the cup at that meal originally committed the person to carrying on Jesus' ministry. The historical Jesus went to his death knowing at least a handful of his disciples would continue the work for which he was giving his life. They had bought into his value system.

We must always keep this in mind when we read the Christian Scriptures. They weren't composed for people mining for Scripture proofs. They were written to help people reflect on what actually happens when one tries to become another Christ.

That's why, for instance, today's Acts passage was composed. Though Luke's helping his community look more into the future than reflect on the past, he's also trying to point out that when they actually live their lives with Jesus' value system, they'll achieve some of the same things the historical Jesus achieved. "Signs and wonders were done among the people." In this case, people were cured of demons which not only brought disorder in their lives and the lives of others, but also affected the environment in which they lived.

Of course, as Luke mentions, because of the effect they were having, some dared not join them. As Jesus quickly discovered during his earthly ministry, there will always be those who thrive on the evil which such disorder brings at the same time he and his followers are trying to eradicate it.

Afraid the apocalyptic genre of our second reading doesn't fit well into the general idea of people using the Christian Scriptures to reflect on their experiences. That's why, for the next few Sundays we really shouldn't get too excited about our passages from the Book of Revelation. (Some scholars, like Dominic Crossan, actually question why this writing is even included in our biblical canon. He points out that many of its passages – like those talking about taking revenge on our enemies – totally contradict the rest of the Christian Scriptures.) Yet we can appreciate why the persecutions which many in the early church were enduring forced some individuals to ignore the present and project themselves into a future revolving around visions, messages from heavenly creatures, and assurances that one day the risen Jesus will see to it that things get better and our persecutors will suffer the consequences of their actions.

Meanwhile, today's pericope from John – proclaimed every year on the Second Sunday of Easter – leads us to reflect on what happens when we're open to Jesus' Spirit working in our forgiveness of all around us. Instead of being content to live in a world in which people labor under the guilt which comes from the sins we've retained, we actually create a totally new environment by our forgiveness.

In some sense, our forgiveness of others is the most practical way we make Jesus' wounds our wounds. Every day we surface occasions to do so. Since scholars commonly believe no one who ever knew the historical Jesus ever wrote anything about him that we possess today, Jesus' remark about "those who have not seen and have believed" becomes quite significant. Not only must we the readers deal with just the risen Jesus, so did the author of John's gospel! We're in the same boat.

It's both encouraging and disturbing to realize that neither of us are exempt from always reflecting on being other Christs.

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