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April 14, 2018

Third Sunday of Easter

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Acts 3:13-15, 17-19

Psalms 4

1 John 2:1-5a

Luke 24:35-48

The most important detail in Luke's accounts of the disciples meeting the risen Jesus may be the fact that he slowly opened their minds to understand what they had previously been unwilling or unable to grasp. Their facile and self-interested ideas about Jesus as Lord or Messiah fell apart with the Passion.

Those of us born into a so-called Christian society may unwittingly share their lack of understanding. We sometimes proclaim, "He was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day," with about the same amount of wonder as we say, "The light just turned green."

When we read the Gospels, it is all too easy to overlook the mind-boggling confusion they convey and thus avoid their invitation to undergo the transformation they offer. To the extent that we succeed in those evasions, we prevent ourselves from sharing the faith experience of an encounter with Christ that the evangelists wanted to communicate.

Sometimes we enter into the stories we hear from Scripture as if they were played out with all the serious solemnity of a papal funeral. That approach can both shroud the fact that people genuinely enjoyed being with Jesus and erase the impact of his great sense of humor. Jesus was well-known for his proficiency as the comeback artist. His great one-liners included challenging the righteous that they'd better remove the 2-by-4 from their eyes before going after a speck in someone else's, as well as challenging the Pharisees with the observation that while straining to avoid ingesting a gnat they were swallowing a camel (Luke 6:42, Matthew 23:24). He

never let his followers take themselves too seriously.

It seems at least remotely possible that when Jesus suddenly materialized in the midst of his disciples on the night of his resurrection, he might have been at least tempted to startle them with a resounding "Boo!"

Luke quotes Jesus as saying "Peace be with you," but that greeting apparently had exactly the same effect as if he had plotted and carried off a plan to make them jump right out of their sandals. Luke says the disciples were "startled and terrified." That sounds like a progression from bad to worse. When their good sense kicked in, they figured that they were seeing a phantom. (So much for giving your friends a wonderful surprise ...)

When we read the Resurrection accounts without supplementary overlays of piety and unquestioned faith, we can start to comprehend how hard it was for the disciples to understand the risen Christ. That is simply because the Resurrection fulfilled everything Jesus had tried to teach them during his ministry, but they had never grasped it. They had loved him, but their faith was never more than a ghost of his own.



(Mark Bartholomew)

The risen Jesus had to begin by convincing them that he himself had returned to them and that he was truly alive; they could see the scars of his suffering and, just as he had done throughout their life together, he could eat with them.

Luke tells us that Jesus nudged his friends through their incredulity and amazement to the point that he could open their minds to understand the Scriptures. The Gospels attest to the fact that until they had been through Jesus' death and resurrection, they did not and perhaps could not understand what he had tried to teach them.

It was one thing to hear him proclaim that the last would be first; it was quite another for them to meet their crucified friend arisen from the dead. They had often heard him preach *metanoia* and forgiveness, but they began to learn what it meant when he transformed their way of thinking by returning to them with his message of peace.

In the end, Jesus mandated his disciples to be his witnesses. He knew that the only way they could learn what his message was about was through preaching it in word and deed.

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Thus, in today's reading from Acts, we meet the new Peter. No longer the braggart, he is a witness. He has become a preacher and agent of forgiveness, even ready to risk his skin for the message that has captivated him. On one hand, people might not recognize him; on another, they would say he had become what he was always meant to be.

In the end, Easter is God's invitation that we all become what we are meant to be in and through the encounter with the risen Christ. All the saints will tell us that the process involves terrible confusion and frightening realizations that prod us beyond our safe boundaries and easy creeds. They will also tell us that the peace we will find is worth any cost.

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Editor's note: This Sunday scripture commentary appears in full in NCR's sister publication Celebration, a worship and homiletic resource. Request a sample issue at CelebrationPublications.org. Sign up to receive [email newsletters](#) every time Spiritual Reflections is posted.

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