

APRIL 12, 2015: SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 4:32-35 I John 5:1-6 John 20:19-31

I begin by sharing an insight I received just a few years ago. Like most everyone who comments on today's gospel passage I make a big thing of Jesus's last remark to Thomas: "Have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed." Obviously the evangelist put these consoling words into this pericope to assure his readers that faith in Jesus' resurrection isn't reserved only for the eyewitnesses of the event. Even we, twenty centuries later, can achieve that same faith.

Yet I only recently connected this assurance with something all Scripture scholars believe: nothing in our Christian Scriptures was written by anyone who personally knew the historical Jesus. None of our sacred authors "saw and then believed." They had experienced the risen Jesus not on Easter Sunday evening or a week later in the upper room, but years later in personal encounters with him/her in relating to members of their Christian communities. That applies even to the person who composed today's gospel pericope!

Those who created our gospels only came to faith in Jesus' actual resurrection years after the event. They might have been chronologically closer to the historical Jesus, but the process by which they began to believe in his resurrection was identical to the one we employ 2,000 years later. There's no other way to reach that essential truth of our faith than by coming into contact with people who show by the way they live that they've come into contact with the risen Jesus in their daily lives.

That appears to be one of the reasons the fourth evangelist places Jesus' command to forgive one another's sins on Easter Sunday night. Nothing better demonstrates our belief in Jesus' resurrection than our determination to become forgiving people. Just as Jesus becomes a new creation through his death and resurrection, so we become new creations by the way we relate to others.

Most commentators are convinced Luke's description of the perfect Jerusalem community in today's Acts pericope is really a goal he's setting for the future and not a reflection on something that actually happened in the past. That he mentions such a self-giving group of people is a sign he understands what it means to have faith in ourselves as the risen Christ's body. Members of the same body treat their members in unique ways. There's no other way to judge and be judged. If we relate to people in selfish ways, then we're demonstrating we have no faith in the risen Jesus among us. Who would come to faith by observing our selfish behavior?

The author of I John especially zeroes in on that behavioral aspect of faith in today's second reading. "In this way we know that we love the children of God when we love God and obey his commandments." When the author speaks about believing "Jesus is the Christ," he, like Paul, is employing the title Christ to refer to the risen Jesus. It's the Christ who instructs us on what it means to be both children of God and keepers of God's commandments.

By mentioning those who "have not seen yet believe," the fourth evangelist is telling us that though he, like Thomas, didn't physically put his hand and finger into Jesus' wounds, he had experienced the wounds of those who had become the body of Christ, those who had been at times wounded to the point of death by the way they gave themselves to others. The gospel author wasn't converted by arguments, but by actions, actions which sprang from a belief in Jesus' generous, life-changing presence right here and now.

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APRIL 19, 2015: THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER  
Acts 3:13-15, 17-19 I John 2:1-5a Luke 24:35-48

Luke bends over backward in today's gospel pericope to demonstrate that the risen Jesus' presence in our lives isn't just a figment of our imagination.

We must first understand that the early Christian community did not have just one way to surface the risen Jesus in their lives. Because, as Paul reminded his communities, the risen Jesus wasn't the resuscitated historical Jesus appearing to his followers, he/she could be experienced in many different situations and in many different forms. After all, as the Apostle put it, the risen Jesus is a new creation, unlike anyone or anything we've encountered before. Yet he/she is real.

It's significant that Luke's risen Jesus makes two Easter Sunday appearances in situations which have something to do with food. He makes himself known to his two "runaway" disciples at the inn in Emmaus during "the breaking of bread." And in today's passage, he proves he's not a ghost by eating a piece of baked fish. In Luke's day and age, proof that someone was real and not a ghost revolved around eating something. The latter couldn't pull that off. Whatever ghosts ate would simply fall through their apparent bodies and end up on the floor. They don't have "flesh and bones" as the risen Jesus has.

But there seems to be a deeper reason for Luke putting Jesus' post-resurrection appearances in the context of meals. He presumes the first Christians most frequently surfaced the risen Jesus during those instances in which they also broke bread, when they celebrated the Lord's Supper. It wasn't so much that they discovered this new creation in the bread and wine as much as in those who participated in the meal. In I Corinthians 11, for instance, we hear Paul bemoan a situation in that Greek Christian community in which some fail to "recognize the body" during the communal meal which then comprised Eucharistic celebrations. It's clear from the context that he's talking about the Body of Christ found in the community, not the Body of Christ found in the bread and wine. No one seems to have had problems surfacing Jesus in the latter; it's the former – finding him/her in one another – that became the trademark, and the test of true Christian faith. That's why today's first and second readings are so important.

Discovering the Christ in those around us can be a messy process. People's personalities will always be a stumbling block. Like ourselves, they're not perfect. Dread the thought, some might actually be sinners! Perhaps that's why forgiveness is a constant theme in our Christian biblical writings.

In today's Acts passage, Peter even forgives those who crucified Jesus. Though he's convinced they ". . . denied the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released," Peter also presumes they ". . . acted out of ignorance." Even those who killed "the author of life" can be forgiven.

The author of I John encourages the members of his community not to sin. Yet at the same time he takes for granted they can't always follow through on his advice. That's why he brings up "the Advocate with the Father" which each of us has. The risen Jesus is "expiation for our sins, and not for our sins only but for those of the whole world." If he's already died for everyone, why do we make everyone's sinfulness an obstacle in surfacing his/her presence in them?

If Jesus is alive among us, he/she is alive in real people, not only in those who are just a figment of our imagination. Is it possible that our determination to forgive one another might be the first step in discovering Jesus in one another?