

APRIL 23RD, 2017: SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

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

Today's second reading tells it like it is. The unknown author of I Peter accurately describes the situation in which followers of Jesus find themselves after his resurrection and before our physical deaths. ". . . Now for a little while you may have to suffer through various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith . . . may prove to be for praise, glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ." According to the writer, we're not just treading water here on earth; day by day we're trying to be more and more genuine people of faith. Carrying on the risen Jesus' ministry is an ongoing process. It doesn't happen at a specific place and time. It's something we achieve every day of our lives, in different places, in different ways, and in our relationships with different people.

Scholars maintain that Luke, in today's Acts passage, is probably painting a picture of a future, ideal Christian community, and not describing the actual first generation Jerusalem church. (The city of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans at least 15 years before he penned Luke/Acts.) Luke uses his well-known "summaries" in Acts to simply provide his third-generation Christian community with a goal toward which they should be aiming. Convinced that a true disciple's life should revolve around the "breaking of bread and the prayers," he shows how being faithful to these two essentials of the faith leads to ". . . the Lord (adding) to their number those who were being saved." Luke's message is clear: if you do it "right," people will come.

Perhaps the practice most attracting others to the faith was the ideal community's habit of ". . . selling their property and possessions and dividing them among all according to each one's need;" a primitive form of Christian communism. No wonder Pope Francis' attempts to return Catholicism to a biblical faith recently prompted some of his detractors to label him a "socialist!" Given his scriptural orientation, Francis has no other choice but to remind us that capitalism isn't a biblically-sanctioned economic system. The problem we face is that the system of sharing which our sacred authors do sanction isn't very acceptable to many of Jesus' modern followers.

Neither is the condition John's Jesus attaches to receiving the Holy Spirit: "Receive the Holy Spirit," he tells his Easter Sunday disciples. "Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained." Scripture scholars don't regard this verse to be a proof-text for the church's power to control the sacrament of Reconciliation. It's much more a reflection on the power all of us share because we're Spirit-filled other Christs. On one hand, when we forgive anyone, he or she is really forgiven on a community level; on the other hand, when we refuse to forgive, they're not forgiven on that same level. Notice the risen Jesus doesn't say anything about *God's* forgiveness. He seems to take that for granted. He simply wants to make us aware of the power we have over others right here and now. I presume he never wants us to "retain" anyone's sins – especially since God's already forgiven all our sins on all levels.

It's significant that the Thomas part of our gospel pericope revolves around the risen Jesus' wounds. If we really are committed to being other Christs, I presume we'll also share the risen Jesus' wounds. Can't think of more painful wounds than those caused by our forgiveness of others. Being aware of Jesus' wounds should make us more conscious and more accepting of our own wounds. If we don't have any wounds to show, maybe we should be questioning the genuineness of our faith.

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APRIL 30TH, 2017: THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 2:14, 22-33 I Peter 1:17-21 Luke 24:13-35

Many of us are so accustomed to relating only to the institutional church that we can't appreciate the early church's quest to relate to the risen Jesus. The first followers of Jesus presumed he/she was with them as a "new creation," a unique individual. As Paul reminded his Galatian community in chapter 3 of his letter to them, the risen Jesus is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female.

There's a huge difference between biblical resurrection and resuscitation. Technically speaking, Jairus' daughter, the widow of Nain's son and Jesus' friend Lazarus weren't raised from the dead; they were resuscitated. Though clinically dead, when Jesus brings them back to life, they're basically the same persons they were before they died. When Jesus, for instance, tells Mr. and Mrs. Jairus to give their resuscitated daughter something to eat, I take for granted if the girl like pepperoni pizzas before she died, they'd naturally pop a pepperoni pizza into the microwave for her now.

On the other hand, someone raised from the dead is a completely new person. He or she is no longer subject to the restrictions that limit you and me: constraints like culture, genetics, and gender. Resurrection breaks down all those barriers. In Scripture, only Jesus is raised from the dead; everyone else who comes back to life is simply resuscitated. This is the one of a kind person biblical Christians expect to surface in their everyday lives.

In doing so, they're simply replicating the experience of Jesus' first followers. As Peter states in today's Acts passage: "God raised this Jesus; of this we are all witnesses." Somehow, somewhere they came face to face with this new creation.

The big question is, "How did they do this? How does one encounter such a unique individual?"

Between the time Jesus rose from the dead (@30 CE) and Luke composed his double volume work (@85 CE) the Christian community had about 55 years to hone the process, to work on developing the details of today's gospel pericope – the first time in Luke's gospel that someone actually recognizes the risen Jesus.

Notice that Jesus doesn't meet the pair head on; coming from Jerusalem, he overtakes them. He'd warned his disciples not to leave the city until after they'd received the Holy Spirit. These two (probably Mr. and Mrs. Cleopas) are disobeying his orders. In his conversation with them, he first insists they appreciate the necessity of his dying before he could rise. Then he "opens" the Scriptures, demonstrating how he's mirrored in those sacred writings. Eventually agreeing to stay with them, he finally makes himself known to the couple "in the breaking of bread."

Scholars point out that, in this encounter, Luke is describing a Eucharist: initially depicting the liturgy of the word, then the liturgy of the bread. In his theology, it was during the celebration of the Lord's Supper – in the "breaking of bread" - that Christians should most expect to encounter the risen Jesus. He clearly puts that theology on the lips of the out-of-breath couple when they return to Jerusalem.

Luke isn't just talking about "going to Mass." Agreeing with Paul's I Corinthians 11 reflection on the Eucharist, he's convinced the Lord's Supper provides us the best opportunity to die to ourselves, become one with all those around us, and actually "recognize the body" of Christ present in our midst. Any other frame of mind during the Eucharist is what the author of I Peter calls "futile conduct."

If we don't know how to die right here and now by correctly participating in the Eucharist, we'll probably have to wait until after our physical deaths to encounter the risen Jesus. What a waste of a life-time!

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