

APRIL 10TH, 2016: THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER
Acts 5:27-32, 40b-41 Revelation 5:11-14 John 21:1-19

Psychologists and psychiatrists often remind us that during any given day, most of us rarely perform any totally free actions. The normal pressures of living in a community environment force us either to do things we by nature wouldn't do, or not do what by nature we would do. Usually the most forceful pressure is that of fear. We worry about the harmful effects our actions will have on us. That's one of the reasons today's first reading is so significant.

Before the 1960s we often defended our faith's rationality with the argument that those who passed our faith onto us were "sciens and verax." In other words, they knew what had happened and truthfully conveyed those facts to us. But once people began to understand the authors of our Christian Scriptures really weren't eyewitnesses to the events they narrated, the sciens part went out the window. A new argument for our faith's reality began to evolve, revolving not so much around our faith ancestors' knowing what happened and faithfully passing it on, but around the drastic change in the personalities of those ancestors springing from their contacts with the risen Jesus.

Luke narrates some of that change in our Acts passage. Remember how he pathetically described Peter's denial of Jesus in the gospel part of his two volume work? The leader of the Twelve was overcome with so much fear that he denied he'd even known this itinerant Galilean preacher, much less was one of his followers. Yet now, after experiencing Jesus alive in his midst, this lowly fisherman courageously informs the Jerusalem authorities, "We must obey God rather than men." What happened to the fear?

I presume it was still there. But it now was alongside another more powerful force: the conviction that nothing was more important than life, and the risen Jesus was providing that life. Along with the author of Revelation all the first Christians learned, "The Lamb that was slain . . . received power and riches, wisdom and strength, honor and glory and blessing." Those with faith in the risen Jesus received the same life and strength, enabling them to overcome the fear which paralyzed others.

Their encounters with the risen Jesus changed their personalities.

Scholars are convinced today's gospel pericope narrates the very first of those encounters. The other gospel meetings seem to have been read back into the disciples' post-resurrection experiences. Notice that Jesus' followers have done what we would have logically expected them to do: return to Galilee after his death. It's only when they go back to doing what they always did – fish – that they experience him as a "new creation." It's in this context that I always mention Elizabeth Bumbler Ross' insight that after the death of a loved one, we eventually have to "go back to work:" we have to return to doing what we did while that loved one was still with us. It's only then that we experience that special person in a new, unique way.

That seems to be exactly what happens in today's gospel pericope. His followers encounter him/her in a different way than they had encountered him before. Yet, how can we be 100% certain we're really coming face to face with the risen Jesus in the ordinary things and people of our daily lives?

There's one rule of thumb that might be a good indicator: after the encounter we discover we're called to do things we've never done before. That certainly happened to Peter by the Sea of Tiberias, and might be the reason some of us refuse to admit such encounters in our own lives. We've already got enough to do.

APRIL 17TH, 2016: FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
Acts 13:14, 43-52 Revelation 7:9, 14b-17 John 10:27-30

No one sits down on a beautiful sunny day, no worry in the world, and writes Scripture. If our sacred authors didn't have some problems bugging them, we'd have no Bible. They only write because something or someone needs to be confronted. That's certainly the case with Luke/Acts.

One of the issues prompting Luke to compose his double volume work was the claim of some Jews that the historical Jesus planned to destroy their religion by bringing huge numbers of Gentiles into it without obligating to keep the 613 Laws of Moses. That certainly was what some of his followers were doing fifty years after his death and resurrection; Luke's day and age.

The evangelist counters their argument, claiming Jesus and his disciples originally evangelized only Jews. Non-Jews came into the picture only after Jews rejected his call to reform. Gentiles simply were benefiting from what Jews had discarded.

Today's Acts pericope contains one of several statements of Luke's thesis. "Both Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, 'It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you (Jews) first, but since you reject it and condemn yourselves as unworthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles.'" In other words, God's word, spoken through Jesus, isn't going to be dead-ended just because those to whom it was originally directed, reject it.

It's significant that, in this passage, the Gentiles who accept the word are a unique group: God fearers. That's the biblical term usually employed for non-Jews who are very favorable to Jews; frequently attending synagogue services, and even keeping some of the Mosaic regulations.

Historians have recently delved into these individuals, reflecting on their position in various Jewish communities. Since they seem to have been generous contributors to Jewish causes – even building some synagogues – their becoming Christians certainly created tension between Jews and Jesus' followers.

Yet it's interesting to note that Paul and Barnabas never stopped preaching when those whom they expected to eagerly receive their word, eventually rejected it. They simply began to realize God's word, as Deutero-Isaiah discovered five centuries before, is alive, and that there's always someone around who's eager to benefit from that life – even if it isn't those whom we logically expected to benefit from it.

I originally taught Scripture to Catholic high school girls, who seemed bored by almost everything I taught. Then one morning, when called into the hall to receive a message from the office, I discovered an eighty some year-old retired nun standing in the corridor outside my classroom door. When I asked if I could help with something, she just smiled and said. "No. I come here and listen whenever you're teaching. We never had many Scripture classes in the convent during my formation. I'm learning a lot from you." Obviously I was teaching the wrong group. Along with high school students, I've been teaching adults ever since.

We have no idea who's going to be in that great heavenly multitude the author of Revelation refers to in our second reading, nor do we have any secret information on what our role is and will be in helping gather that multitude. But we do know there'll always be people out there listening for the voice of the shepherd. John's Jesus is convinced of that.

As other Christs, our job is to never stop preaching that word. Deutero-Isaiah was convinced it always has an effect, no matter how or to whom it's proclaimed. But it does bother me that the gospel Jesus was frequently criticized and dismissed because he preached it to sinners. Wouldn't you think the "good folk" would do more with it than sinners? Does that create a problem?