

MAY 5TH, 2019: THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER
Acts 5:27-32, 40b-41 Revelation 5:11-14 John 21:1-19

An inherent problem in appreciating Scripture is that a lot of things which happened over a long period of time are often telescoped by our sacred authors to appear they took place more quickly. The apostles' understanding of Jesus' resurrection provides a classic example. The angels at the empty tomb, the women's experiences and Jesus' Easter Sunday appearances seem to have provided his disciples all the proof they needed to convince them he'd truly risen. And all this happens in less than 24 hours.

Thankfully someone attached today's chapter 21 to John's finished gospel to let us know it didn't happen exactly that way. The vast majority of today's scholars are convinced our first reading contains the earliest account of a post-resurrection appearance of Jesus we have. There are no angels, no prior appearances. After their disastrous Passover pilgrimage, Jesus' disciples trek back to Capernaum and do what most people do when their world has crashed, just mope around, doing nothing. Probably in that condition for weeks, Peter finally does what Elizabeth Kübler-Ross tells us we all must eventually do: return to work. "I'm going back to fishing," he announces.

It's only when the Rock and his fellow fishermen return to doing what they did before they encountered Jesus of Nazareth that they discover this itinerant preacher is now present in their lives in a new, unique way, present especially when they share a meal, something they had often done with the historical Jesus. Yet notice there's not ironclad recognition of the risen Jesus, either at the sea or on the shore. Only the "beloved disciple" recognizes him from the boat, and though all recognize him during the meal, some seem to still have questions about whether it's the Christ or not.

But it's a significant aspect of John's theology that when they recognize the risen Jesus, they also recognize they've been called by him/her. Peter provides the example. In a classic reversal of his three denials, this leader of the apostolic community now professes his love three times. Like Jesus, he's a changed person.

Luke also zeros in on Peter's changed personality. All his gospel readers remember how he cowered from a serving girl on the night Jesus was tried. Yet now in Acts, just a few weeks later, he boldly stands up in public and challenges the high priest's command to "stop preaching in (Jesus') name." Though he once feared the suffering that would be his by admitting his association with this Capernaum carpenter, he now "rejoices that (he) had been found worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name." What once brought pain and death, now brings life.

Likewise the author of Revelation looks at the "Lamb's" suffering and death through different eyes. By enduring such pain, he wasn't destroyed, he was "enthroned."

But, as I mentioned above, it took some time for Jesus' followers to reach that amazing conclusion. Presuming the weakness of our human nature, it's almost impossible for us to instantly morph into the individuals the risen Jesus expects us to be. That's why we shouldn't feel inferior to our biblical heroes. Those who described their scriptural transformations weren't interested in setting up a timeline for us to copy; they were much more concerned with giving us an ideal picture of what our own transformations should one day become.

I'd personally love to find out how long it actually took Jesus' disciples to put two and two together and discover the meaning of the empty tomb, or for Peter to build up the courage to eventually "witness" for the risen Jesus. I presume those closest to the historical Jesus would be the first to understand that, in old age, I'm still trying to become another Christ.

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MAY 12TH, 2019: FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 13:14, 43-52 Revelation 7:9, 14b-17 John 10:27-30

One of the reasons Luke wrote Acts is found in today's first reading. Some early Jewish critics of Christianity were claiming that from the beginning Jesus of Nazareth was planning to destroy Judaism by opening the reform he preached to non-Jews. According to them, the Gentile converts multiplying in Christianity during Luke's day and age weren't accidental. The whole process was part of the Capernaum carpenter's master plan from day one.

Luke responds, "No way!" The Gentiles who were accepting the risen Jesus' faith were a total surprise. If non-Jews were becoming other Christs it was only because many of those who were originally invited to experience Jesus' dying and rising personally rejected the invitation.

Luke shares his read on this unexpected situation in today's first reading. Paul and Barnabas, as good Jews, initially bring the message of Jesus' death and resurrection to their fellow Jews in the Antioch synagogue. Only after those worshipers contradict what the pair proclaim with "violent abuse," do the two state the evangelist's thesis: "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first, but since you reject it and condemn yourselves as unworthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles."

No secret plan existed to evangelize Gentiles. Paul and his co-evangelizers were forced to develop one out of necessity when the unexpected happened. Though Jewish Christians were still obligated to keep the 613 Mosaic laws along with imitating the risen Jesus, Gentile Christians simply concentrated on the latter.

The greatest 20th century scholar of the Christian Scriptures – Rudolph Bultmann - once observed, "Eventually the preacher became the preached." During his earthy ministry, Jesus of Nazareth preached a reform of Judaism. After his death and resurrection, he/she became the reform he had once preached. Nowhere is this change clearer than in today's famous gospel pericope about Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

Most probably written in the mid-90s, this Johannine passage speaks about Jesus shepherding his people. It isn't the first time the gospel Jesus lists the characteristics of a good shepherd. He does so a generation or two before in both Matthew and Luke. But in those prior passages, he never identifies with the shepherd. He simply speaks about God – as a shepherd – wasting lots of time and effort going after "lost" sheep. Only at the end of the first Christian century does someone eventually identify the risen Jesus as such a shepherd. The preacher has finally become the preached.

Of course, once people no longer have the "Jewishness" of their faith to fall back on, they have no choice but to concentrate completely on the Christ, as does the author of Revelation. His theology closely parallels John: "The Lamb . . . will shepherd them and lead them to springs of life-giving water . . ." If you're not following the risen Jesus, you'll end up dying of thirst.

The basic problem for non-Jewish Christians is that those who break concentration on the risen Jesus among them are going to have terrific difficulties accomplishing the reform he preached. I presume that was the main reason celebrations of the Eucharist were essential for the earliest Christians. They simply couldn't be who they were expected to be without creating frequent occasions to give themselves to one another.

It's more than a shame that the biblical Breaking of Bread eventually developed into just a series of prayers and rituals by which a person gains sufficient graces to one day get into heaven. None of our Christian sacred authors could have foreseen that development.

Church historians tell us reform of the church must begin with reform of the Eucharist. Considering the recent translation foisted on us by Rome, we've got a long way to go.

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