

APRIL 11th, 2021: SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

[Acts 4:32-35; I John 5:1-6; John 20:19-31](#)

Looking back at my pre-scriptural religious education, it seems the only “vision” instilled in me was my being in heaven one day. If I daydreamed about anything having to do with this earth it probably revolved around all my friends and family converting to Catholicism so we could spend eternity together. I certainly didn't share the vision of the gospel Jesus.

That's why many of the Easter season Acts readings are so important. Scholars agree the glimpses of the early Jerusalem Christian community which Luke provides most probably aren't accurate historical photographs of that church, a community in which “there was no needy person among them.” Luke seems simply to be depicting an ideal community, one in which Christians are living as Jesus expects them to live. He's sharing Jesus' vision with his readers, encouraging them to spend their lives trying to make that vision a reality. Unlike my early religious education, it had little to do with getting into heaven. It was much more about creating a little bit of heaven here on earth.

In this passage, the death entailed in creating that heaven revolves around giving up personal ownership of property. It's clear from the following Ananias and Sapphira narrative that no one was obligated to take such a drastic step in order to become a Christian. Yet, if we're other Christs, the possibility of such an action should always be in the back of our minds.

Of course, the reason for such an extraordinary move should always be in the front of our minds: love. The unknown author of I John clearly understands its positioning. Love is always central for all Jesus' followers. “We know that we love the children of God,” he writes, “when we love God and obey his commandments.” Our faith can only “conquer the world” by falling back on the power of love.

Yet for most of us, even more drastic than giving up property is giving up revenge; something John's Jesus expects all of us to do all of the time. That's one of the reasons he gives us his Spirit, to help us forgive others.

We Catholics have been so accustomed to hearing Jesus' words about “forgiving” and “retaining” as the proof text for the church's power to “hear confessions,” that we forget he never wanted anyone to retain someone's sins. He simply seems to be pointing out the consequences of such behavior. In case we haven't noticed, when we forgive a person, that person's sins are actually forgiven. When we go against his teachings and retain a person's sins, those sins remain part of who that person is. We then not only have to worry about our sins, we also have to worry about his or her sins. Unforgiven, they become part of our sinfulness.

I frequently remind my students that Scripture provides us with two separate occasions for the Spirit's arrival: Pentecost morning in Acts and Easter Sunday night in John. I also point out that the Acts narrative is accompanied by several “disturbing” phenomena: noise, wind and fire, reminding us that the Spirit always disturbs our otherwise tranquil life. The same is true of John's narrative. Fulfilling Jesus' vision of a forgiving community can be just as disturbing as noise, wind and fire. It's at right angles to many of our personalities.

No wonder Thomas wants to see and touch the risen Jesus' wounds as proof he/she actually exists. It's really Jesus only if this “new creation” can show the scars resulting from living out his vision.

I trust one day that same Jesus will check on our scars when we finally encounter him at the pearly gates. If we haven't shared his wounds, I presume neither did we share his vision.

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APRIL 18th, 2021: THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

[Acts 3:13-15, 17-19; I John 2:1-5a; Luke 24:35-48](#)

One of the most significant lines in today's three readings comes at the end of our gospel pericope. Appearing to his disciples on Easter Sunday night, Luke's Jesus reminds them, "You are witnesses of these things."

This verse assures us Jesus' true followers aren't identified by the catechism answers they can rattle off, the number of indulgences they've acquired, or the religious symbols they wear. They're simply people to be listened to, witnesses to Jesus' dying and rising; not so much because they actually were in Jerusalem during Passover week in 30 CE, but because they've had the same dying/rising experience in their own lives. Since these life-changing things happened to them, they must also have happened to him. That's what makes them other Christs; they share the same experiences.

Peter can certainly witness to this unique happening. Just a few weeks before, he emphatically told one of the high priest's maids, "Woman, I do not know him!" when she asked about his relationship with some newly arrested Galilean carpenter. Now he not only cures a crippled beggar in Jesus' name, he openly chides those who took part in putting him to death. Yet he doesn't do so just to give them a guilt trip, he wants them "to convert, that your sins may be wiped away." He hopes they'll also be witnesses of Jesus' dying and rising in their own lives.

Of course, the main way our sacred authors believe we die and rise with Jesus is by undergoing a "metanoia:" a repentance. That's how he began his public ministry; proclaiming the presence of God in the lives of those who undergo a total change in their value systems. The author of I John sees this repentance as revolving around keeping God's commandments as Jesus taught them; focusing on the needs of others around us. Those who experience the risen Jesus in their daily lives because of their value-change must be witnesses of that experience. It's not something they're to keep to themselves. Others must also be invited to share in this new life.

It's important in today's gospel pericope that the two Emmaus disciples mention that the risen Jesus "was made known to them in the breaking of the bread." Though Luke's Jesus takes great pains on Easter Sunday night to prove he's "not a ghost," how do we know he/she's real today? The chief way is in the breaking of the bread.

Though most of our early Eucharistic catechesis zeroed in on Jesus' presence in the bread, we know from Paul's letters — especially I Corinthians — that second-generation Christians stressed his/her presence in one another. It was little skin off their teeth to profess faith in Jesus' presence in the bread (and wine); it was "controversial" to acknowledge that same presence in those standing or sitting around them. If they couldn't experience the risen Jesus in them, then he most probably was just a ghost.

Constant reform of the Eucharist is essential to our Christian faith. Since the Reformation we already have a huge percentage of Protestant communities who rarely participate in the breaking of bread. One need only read the minutes of the Council of Trent to discover a few of the 16th century Eucharistic abuses. No wonder reformers swore off such magical practices.

As the late Bishop Frank Murphy taught our North American College class of 1965, "It's your job to form the Eucharistic community into the Body of Christ." Nothing should stop us presiders or the participants from carrying out that ministry. If we worry only about saying the right words and performing the right gestures we'll never have a true breaking of the bread, and never help anyone become a true witness, even ourself.

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APRIL 25th, 2021: FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

[Acts 4:8-12; I John 3:1-2; John 10:11-18](#)

One of the most difficult things for modern Christians to pull off is to put ourselves in the environment of our Christian sacred authors. What triggers them to write, and for whom are they writing? They certainly aren't writing for followers of Jesus in the 21st century.

I grew up in the 20th century, a period when we regarded our priests as the community's "other Christs." They alone did what the historical Jesus did. They, for instance, could definitively forgive sins and make Jesus present in the Eucharist. No one except priests could do either. Those who wanted to receive the "effects" of Jesus had to have priests around.

During my grade school days, I especially felt sorry for Catholics in communist China. How could they get into heaven? The authorities had killed or expelled most priests. Though someone could make a perfect act of contrition and have his or her mortal sins forgiven without priestly confession, our pastor one day mentioned that he didn't think any of us could ever make a perfect act of contrition. It was beyond our ability. That meant Chinese Catholics were doomed! (Not to mention those unfortunate Chinese who weren't Catholic.)

Early Christian communities didn't have to face those problems. No one person was essential to carrying on the ministry of the risen Jesus. As we know from Paul's letters, the community together makes up the Body of Christ. It's not complicated. Different people in that body simply have different gifts of the Spirit, enabling them to minister as the risen Jesus to one another. There's no clergy or laity. No one is "ontologically different" from anyone else. Should a minister die, the Spirit simply makes certain someone else steps in and takes over that ministry — without that person having to go through years of seminary training.

That's why, in today's Acts reading, Peter was able to heal the "cripple." He's simply taking over the historical Jesus' ministry. If Jesus healed, Peter heals. The essential thing is simply to continue doing what Jesus did. One reason Luke wrote Acts was to let his readers know this continuation is going on. These "other Christs" are functioning well. Because they've made the Christ the cornerstone of their lives, the historical Jesus has become the risen Jesus.

We need only read I John's passage to hear the identification the writer presumes exists between the risen Jesus and the members of his community. We, like Jesus, are actually God's children. But in the future we'll become even more than that; we'll eventually "be like him." These first century Christians are something else!

But they also accept the responsibilities of their uniqueness. Not only do they look at Jesus as the good shepherd in their midst, as other Christs, and readers of John's gospel, they must also be involved in shepherding. It's one thing to marvel at how the historical Jesus conceived of his ministry of unifying and caring for people, but it's a whole other thing to conceive of ourselves in that same position. If he was able to pull this off over 2,000 years ago, why can't we do the same today?

No wonder the gospel Jesus speaks about "laying down" his life for the flock. Bringing people together is a life-long process, especially when it comes to including "those other sheep who do not belong to this fold." It takes many "deaths" to make people one. It's far easier to build walls than bridges.

Our sacred authors never planned to write a collection of proof texts intended to maintain an institution. Their goal is simply to encourage their readers to become the person they describe, not a member of the clergy or laity, but another Christ.

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MAY 2nd, 2021: FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

[Acts 9:26-31; I John 3:18-24; John 15:1-8](#)

To correctly interpret Scripture, we must take ourselves out of our day and age and put ourselves in the day and age of Scripture's original readers. For instance, most of us who read today's Christian Scriptures are members of various institutions which have been promoting the "Christian religion" for centuries. We have specific rules and regulations we're expected to follow, clear-cut dogmas to which we're committed to adhere. Our first century Christian authors, on the other hand, were part of a movement, not members of an institution. Instead of following definitive rules, regulations and dogmas, they were simply expected to follow a person: the risen Jesus among them. How they accomplished that often differed person to person, but as we hear in today's three readings, there were certain "things" which applied to everyone.

It's clear from today's gospel pericope that John and his readers considered themselves branches of a vine which, because of Jesus' resurrection, had been growing for just over 60 years. The Christ and his/her disciples had been one throughout those three generations. "I am the vine," John's Jesus proclaims. "You are the branches." Unlike many religious institutions today, the evangelist was much more interested in his readers becoming one with the Christ than in becoming one with the institution. The goal always is to "bear much fruit;" to bring as much life into this world as the vine originally produced. No one could pull this off by himself or herself. It all revolved around being branches of the risen Jesus.

Of course, those branches could only produce fruit by being "pruned."

Years ago I heard an interview of well-known botanist reflecting on his recent visit to Japan. He traveled there to advise fruit growers how to get more production from their trees. "The problem was immediately clear," he said, "they almost never pruned their trees."

He quickly picked up a pruning tool and began sawing off some of the over-abundant branches. After a minute or two demonstrating the proper technique, he turned around to ask for questions, amazed to see several of the growers with tears in their eyes. "I had destroyed the natural, beautiful symmetry of their trees."

He handed the pruning tool back to them and said, "You can produce beautiful trees or you can produce fruit. You can't do both. The choice is up to you."

In some sense, that's also the dilemma facing Christian churches. We can create beautiful, inspiring, well-ordered institutions, or we can produce the fruit Jesus expects of us. We can't do both.

Though Luke shows us a very ordered church in his Acts of the Apostles, it's clear from today's passage that, behind the scenes, a lot of pruning was going on. Instead of immediately receiving the newly-converted Saul with open arms, the Jerusalem community is standoffish. How can they be certain his Damascus Road conversion story is really true, and not just a slick gimmick created to arrest more Christians? If it weren't for Barnabas, the future Apostle to the Gentiles would have been left out in the cold. But even after he's rendered "acceptable," his confrontative style creates so many problems that the community's solution is simply to give him a one-way ticket back to Tarsus. To say the least, he was disrupting the church's order.

That also seems to be why the author of I John zeros in on the basics of the faith, totally ignoring its "beauty points." We're to be judged only on how "we keep (Jesus') commandments and do what is pleasing to him." There's no other way to produce fruit.

Is it possible some Catholics today are trying to take the pruning tool out of Pope Francis' hands? Maybe there's still time to stop him reshaping the church.

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MAY 9TH, 2021: SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

[Acts 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48; I John 4:7-11; John 15:9-17](#)

I learned very early in my religious career that one sign the Roman Catholic Church is the one and only “true” church revolves around the conviction that only the Roman Catholic Church has never changed through the centuries. Though other churches have frequently changed, we’ve toed the line, never altering our beliefs, never modifying our practices. We believe and do whatever Jesus commanded us to believe and do at the Last Supper.

Then I fell into the diabolical heresy of studying Scripture.

Among other things, I learned the earliest followers of Jesus followed the risen, not the historical Jesus. They were much more concerned with what the Christ among them was teaching and expecting of them than what the Galilean carpenter had taught and expected of his original disciples a generation or two before. The historical Jesus certainly wasn’t irrelevant, but through his resurrection he had morphed into a new creation, a person who, as Paul believed and taught, was as much a Jew as a Gentile, a free person as a slave, and a woman as a man. He/she not only was concerned with what happened to his fellow Jews in Palestine between 6 BCE and 30 CE, the risen Christ now also cared about those who lived years later, in places far beyond Palestine, Jews and non-Jews alike. That’s why the members of this unique community didn’t hesitate to change. But they certainly didn’t change for change’s sake. There was a method behind their “mobility;” a method we hear especially in today’s gospel pericope. A method revolving around love.

John’s Jesus couldn’t be clearer: “This is my commandment: love one another as I love you.” Notice, he doesn’t say, “Love one another as I have loved you.” The evangelist has him refer to the present, not the past. Jesus of Nazareth didn’t show love once upon a time, he/she, as the risen Christ, is giving us love right here and now. It’s ongoing.

I frequently reminded my high school marriage course students that there’s no one action which to everyone, in every place, at every time shows love. Signs of love change as the people around us and the circumstances they encounter change. We who are commanded to love must always be alert to employing actions which show love to this particular person, in this particular time and place. For Christians, change isn’t a curse, it’s a loving necessity.

Love of others is at the heart of Jesus’ faith, as the author of I John insists in our second reading. “Let us love one another,” he writes, “because love is of God: everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God.” Since to biblically know someone or something is to experience someone or something, the author is telling his readers, “The only way we can experience God in our lives is to love one another.” There are no shortcuts.

One of the reasons Luke originally composed his Acts of the Apostles was to let his community know how a church that began as 100 percent Jewish in the 30s, was, in the mid-80s when he wrote, quickly becoming 100 percent Gentile. A real sea change! Though Luke assures us that the Holy Spirit was certainly behind this fundamental switch in membership, most scholars are convinced that, on just a natural level, when Jewish Christians began to love Gentiles as much as the risen Jesus loved them, they couldn’t understand why non-Jews couldn’t also be other Christs. Love eventually opened up the Christian community to love as the Christ loves.

Though this insight flies in the face of my childhood catechism classes, unchangeableness isn’t a sign of divine authenticity; it’s simply a sign we’ve refused to love.

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MAY 13th or MAY 16th, 2021: ASCENSION OF JESUS

[Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:17-23; Mark 16:15-20](#)

It's far easier simply to say, "Jesus has risen!" than to reflect on the implications of his resurrection. The fact we have four — sometimes contradictory - gospel narratives of the discovery of his empty tomb prove that point. Because of our evangelists' Semitic both/and thought process, each offers us a different dimension and different consequences of that event. Our problem is that we've squeezed these diverse gospel narratives into chronological liturgical readings. That means, because of our Greek either/or thought process, we've "canonized" one of these theologies and left the others behind. We, for instance, overlook that fact there's no definitive ascension of Jesus in either Mark, Matthew, or John. Since we've inserted Luke's ascension theology into our liturgical year, we not only presume that's all there is, we rarely notice the implications Luke's trying to convey in expressing his theology in his unique way.

Among other things, Luke is convinced, in the absence of the historical Jesus, that the Holy Spirit is the force guiding the Christian community. His Jesus couldn't be clearer. Just before he ascends he tells his disciples to expect Pentecost. "In a few days," he says, "you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." In other words, "The Spirit will shortly take my place."

We who faithfully depend on the institutional church to tell us what God wants us to do, have little space for that Spirit in our religious experiences. Growing up Catholic, about the only time we were expected to pray to the Holy Spirit was immediately before we took our school exams. Hopefully the Spirit would remind us what our teachers had taught on various subjects, not enlighten us on what the risen Jesus was telling us to do in our daily lives.

The Pauline disciple who wrote the letter to the Ephesians poetically speaks about the risen Jesus "seated at (God's) right hand in the heavens." Yet he also reminds his readers about the "Spirit of wisdom and revelation" which we received when we first experienced God in our lives. No way we can be other Christs without constantly falling back on that Spirit, whether the risen Jesus is relaxing triumphant in heaven or actively working among us here on earth.

It's important to know that today's gospel pericope was not originally part of Mark's gospel. Even the bishops at the Council of Trent (1545) agreed someone had tacked verses 9-20 onto Mark's gospel long after the evangelist completed it. (By the way, there are Marcan manuscripts with at least two other non-original endings. Most probably the gospel simply ended with verse 8, as disturbing as that is.)

Since Jesus' followers didn't seem to have regarded the Christian Scriptures as divinely inspired until the latter part of the third century, people could "mess around" with those writings and not worry about divine retribution. Mark's original abrupt ending to his gospel — the risen Jesus is simply "out there somewhere" - seems to have provided a made to order invitation to those who had problems with the different theologies in other writings. Someone eventually strung those passages together in a way that "made sense," one that fit their either/or Greek mentality.

It doesn't do much harm to read today's addition (except for those churches whose worship services revolve around handling poisonous snakes.) But these verses should be a reminder that our faith originally wasn't a matter of either/or. If we celebrate today's feast knowing Jesus' ascension was one among several ways to surface the implications of Jesus' resurrection, we're correctly looking at this celebration from a biblical point of view. If, on the other hand, we think our liturgical chronology accurately conveys historical chronology, we'd best sign up for a course in Scripture 101 as soon as possible.

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MAY 16th, 2021: SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

[Acts 1:15-17, 20a, 20c-26; I John 4:11-16; John 17:11b-19](#)

I often mention that today's John 17 gospel pericope was always proclaimed on a very solemn occasion in one of the seminaries I attended: immediately after priestly ordinations, just before the meal commemorating that happy event. In that non-biblical context, we (men) automatically bought into the introduction the lector gave this passage: "Jesus' prayer for his newly ordained priests." The "them" about whom the gospel Jesus was speaking could only be priests, no one else need apply.

It's difficult for us who grew up with the idea that the Roman Catholic priesthood has always been essential to our faith to admit that particular institution is just as frequently found in Scripture as are electric lights. The priesthood, as we know it, won't evolve until long after the biblical period. It's a shame that a gospel prayer originally intended for all Jesus' followers was eventually limited to just a small portion of those people.

When, during the Last Supper, John's Jesus speaks about those to whom "he gave his word," who he prays "will be kept from the evil one," who he's convinced "are in the world, but not of the world," he's not referring to individuals who have received priestly ordination, but to those who have been baptized, everyone who's determined to carry on his ministry. In a world without clergy and laity, he can't be referring to anyone else.

John's main purpose in this pericope is to remind his community of how unique it is to be a disciple of the risen Jesus. Like himself/herself, they're "new creations." Not only can't they judge themselves by anyone else's standards, they have to be prepared for a ministry unlike any other. Among other things, as other Christs they have to anticipate the same problems the first Christ experienced. They'll frequently find themselves in a world which hates them, simply because they're carrying on his ministry. "As you sent them into the world," he states, "so I sent them into the world." It won't take long to discover they, like Jesus, are committed to a different value system than a lot of the people around them.

Why doesn't he get them quickly out of their misery and take them immediately into heaven? The answer's simple: if they don't hang in there and endure the pain, nothing in this world is ever going to change for the better. The Father didn't rescue him, why should he rescue them? He can only guarantee his community that his care of them will be just as unique as they are.

Luke is also convinced that Jesus' followers are carrying on his ministry. Though those who chose our liturgical readings have conveniently left out Acts' contradictory account of Judas' death, it's still important he be replaced. Luke's convinced the Twelve must be intact when the Spirit arrives on Pentecost. (Notice the next member of the Twelve who dies isn't replaced. Once the Holy Spirit is in charge, we no longer need the Twelve. The community's in the Spirit's hands.)

The exceptional care Jesus has for his followers is driven by one basic principle: "If God so loved us, we also must love one another." The author of I John couldn't be clearer. "God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in them." We have one basic mission in life: to love others.

We who've stratified our world by splitting it between clergy and laity are called by the risen Jesus to get rid of that nonsense and return to his faith. His world is populated only with those who love and those who don't love. If we can't pull that off, we're really not "his." Especially embarrassing for those, I would think, who are the monsignors among us.

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