

Third Sunday of Easter (Cycle A)
(Acts 2:14,22³³; 1 Pet 1:17²¹; Luke 24:13³⁵)

It is a shame, but sometimes teachers try to gain popularity with students by coming out with bizarre ideas. One student came to me enthralled with a new prof because he started out class by declaring “There are no angels, and then he proceeded to demonstrate,” she said, “that there are no angels.” It’s not a laughing matter, but I laughed to myself: how on earth could you prove there are no angels? It seems it would be harder to demonstrate that angels don’t exist than that they do. Another example, touching closer on the Easter theme, a prof who had bizarre ideas about the nature of Jesus’ resurrection, told his students, “The real test of your faith is, if they were to find a tomb with Jesus’ bones, would you still believe in the resurrection?”—obviously suggesting that they should. I hasten to add that these were young, half-baked teachers, who didn’t deserve a hearing. A seasoned scholar such as Raymond Brown would reply, “Whether YOU would still believe is not relevant; the real question is, would the apostles have continued to believe?”

Today’s first reading helps us understand this. It is in some ways typical of the way St. Peter proclaimed the gospel, telling who Jesus was, the wonderful things He had done, His crucifixion, and the His resurrection. In one way, however, it is not typical because it is delivered in Jerusalem, and Peter can quote Psalm 16 (which was believed to have been written by David), “you will not abandon my soul to the netherworld, nor will you suffer your holy one to see corruption” and he can continue “one can confidently say that David died and was buried and his tomb is in our midst to this day.” But he could

go on to say of Jesus, “neither was He abandoned to the netherworld, neither did He see corruption. God raised this Jesus, of this we are all witnesses.” He could not have said this if Jesus’ body or bones were in a tomb or anywhere else. The empty tomb is the beginning of resurrection faith, as all four gospels attest.

It would be pointless to speculate much about the nature of Jesus’ resurrection. Someone asked me, “Since He had a body, how could He go through doors?” A simple answer would be that it isn’t said He went through doors, but that He appeared among them, even though the doors were locked. Luke and John are at pains to indicate Jesus had a real body— Luke by presenting Him as eating before the apostles, John as having Doubting Thomas touch His hands and side. There was, however, a real transformation. St. Paul compares it to the case of the seed that is sown and the plant that comes from it: “it is sown corruptible, it is raised incorruptible.” As in our Easter hymn, “Now the green blade riseth from the buried grain.”

Today’s gospel about the disciples on the road to Emmaus is among my favorite resurrection accounts. It resembles the others on many points. Jesus appears playful as they are kept from recognizing Him (remember Mary Magdalen: “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?”) With these disciples, He pretends to know nothing of what has happened, draws from them a somewhat inadequate explanation, “He was a prophet, mighty in deed and word.” When they seemed skeptical of the report of the women about His being alive, He reproaches them for their lack of understanding and asks, “Was it not necessary that the Messiah suffer these things and so enter into his glory?” And

so He opened the Scriptures to them so that they would understand. “He opened the Scriptures to them” is a very apt term because there is no record of pre-Christian belief in a suffering and rising Messiah. The prophets did foretell future events, but normally only as related to events that the nation was immediately involved in. Christians often believe (and are taught!) that the OT clearly teaches about Jesus’ coming and the events of His life, but that is not true. The old procedure of using the OT for proof-texting is no longer possible according to the Pontifical Biblical Commission. This body, an instrument of Papal teaching, issued in recent years a document on the “Christian Use of the Old Testament.” It teaches that although the Christian is aware that the internal dynamism of the OT finds its goal in Jesus, this is a retrospective perception whose point of departure is not the OT texts as such but the events of the NT proclaimed by the apostolic preaching.

After instructing His disciples, Jesus again turns playful in pretending that he is going to continue traveling and needs to be persuaded to stay with them. Thanks to this we have that “Stay with us, Lord, for the day is almost over”—a poignant phrase we use often during Paschaltide. Jesus goes in with them, breaks bread and, in the breaking of the bread their eyes are opened and they recognize Him, but He disappears from their sight. They rush back to Jerusalem to share the glad news, only to hear: “The Lord is truly risen and has appeared to Simon.”

It is very important to note the statement, “They recognized Him in the breaking of the bread.” Here Luke attempts to summon up the vision of the Eucharist, in which, for his community and every community since then, Jesus is

known in the breaking of the bread.

How much background goes into that simple statement! Certainly all those meals with Jesus they had experienced. And those meals in which Jesus welcomed sinners to table fellowship. And the multiplication of the loaves, when, in the Galilean countryside, He welcomed a huge crowd, nourished them first with His teaching, and then, unwilling to send them away weak and hungry, fed them miraculously with a few loaves and fishes. And most especially the Last Supper, when Jesus gave His body and blood under the signs of bread and wine and so instituted the Eucharist. All of this lies behind the words "their eyes were opened and they recognized him." This moment is so important to Luke that he repeats it. When they returned to Jerusalem they told the others "how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread."

And Luke tells the story in just this way because it is something that happened not just once but should happen every time the Christian community celebrates the Eucharist. Of course, it doesn't happen automatically. We have to come to the table with the same dispositions Jesus and His early followers had. If we recognize that among our table fellows are sinners, that our table fellowship in fact embraces countless people all over the globe, black and white and yellow, lepers and AIDs victims, our Holy Father and the women whose feet he washed"most importantly, those here present with us now; if we believe that Jesus is truly risen, that He has poured forth His Spirit upon us, and if we are willing to embrace all whom He embraces, then, but only then, will we know Jesus in the breaking of the bread.