

Easter 3 2015 Luke 24: 35-48

The gospels give a variety of stories about how ordinary people made the amazing discovery that Jesus had risen from the dead. There are as many ways that people do this, as there are people. Most of them involve a personal encounter.

The lack of a personal encounter is what makes the discovery of the empty tomb so traumatic for the women with spices who discover it. As we will see, even the personal encounters have a troubling or “challenging” element.

One of the women, Mary Magdalene, isolates herself, and stands outside the tomb weeping. Her grief may be excessive. She is a symbol of passionate love, but there is a quality of selfishness, maybe, in her passion. There is no right and wrong way of grieving, and you have to pass through its various stages. It has to be said that some stages are self-centered; there is resentment in the experience of loss. How dare you leave me? How will I live without you? The risen Jesus comes to break through Mary’s blame. His first attempt does not succeed. She thinks he is the gardener who has taken the body; she wants the old Jesus, the Jesus she is comfortable with. Jesus calls her name, to which she responds gladly. There is recognition. But in the instant of recognition there is withdrawal: do not cling to me.

We dealt with the experience of Thomas last Sunday. Thomas the skeptic, Thomas who refuses to believe by second-hand report. “Unless I can see and feel the nail-prints, thrust my hand in his side, I will not believe.” There is stubbornness, but also self-awareness. Jesus honors this by appearing again, just for Thomas. He says, see; touch; feel. Do not be faithless but believing. The account is ambiguous about whether Thomas actually does what he said he needed to do. Does he actually touch and thrust, or is the invitation sufficient? We do know that his confession of faith is the most profound in the gospel, recognizing Jesus’ divinity. The confession, “My Lord and my God!” It is a peak moment surpassing even Peter’s confession of Jesus as messiah.

Peter has guilt and shame to work through (as many of us may have). He has fallen down on the job of discipleship. This is embarrassing after a hot-headed pledge never to forsake the master. Jesus knew this in advance, and tried to soften the blow with his prediction about the cock-crow. It all comes sadly true. Thus it is no surprise that Peter regresses after the crucifixion. He goes back to Galilee, intending to pick up his former way of life. It doesn’t work. He catches no fish. Then the stranger appears, “Children, have you caught anything?”

Nothing. “Well then, cast your net on the other side, try a different method.” There are so many fish that the net is about to break. The beloved disciple shouts, “It is the Lord.” Love gains insight when logical methods fail. Peter, tied to logic but impulsive, jumps off the boat, and splashes to land. He exercises the monastic tendency of leaving the heavy work to others. When all are on shore, there is breakfast in the murky pre-dawn light. But it is awkward. “Now none of the disciples dared to ask who are you; they knew it was the Lord.” This is an odd statement: were they really so certain, or were they afraid to ask, stunned by what this appearance might mean?

What follows is the excruciating interrogation, Jesus asking whether Peter loves him. Three times, to match the number of denials. Peter is pained; I myself resent it for him. He is given a special commission, but the pain goes with him, as a reminder of his weakness and failure. The reminder slows down his impulsiveness and makes him compassionate. A leader must understand weakness, in order to be strong.

Today’s gospel refers to the anonymous disciples walking downcast to an imaginary village on Easter evening. I say anonymous: though we know the name of one of them, Cleopas, we know nothing more. Imaginary because Emmaus, like Cana where water changed to wine, cannot be identified on maps of Palestine. The two disciples represent us. They have no objective other than wanting to get away from a place of pain. Consumed by their own problems, or interpretation of those problems, they don’t notice that Jesus has caught up with us. Yet they like the stranger, they listen to him, without fully understanding, and they invite him in. They don’t get it until he blesses and breaks the bread. But poof, he is gone, like smoke, not giving a chance to ask all the things they’d like to know. The fatigued disciples are re-energized. They run the seven miles back to Jerusalem where they report their experience. “Our eyes were opened, and we saw him. Did not our hearts burn within us as he explained the scriptures on the road?”

Burning like the burning bush. Holy ground. The inner eye being opened. Enlightenment being received. We can’t hold on to Christ, we may lose the initial fervor, but we have been changed, if we let ourselves stay changed.

Finally, the beloved disciple. He is also a runner. With Peter, who is older and slower, he runs to the tomb. Peter as senior goes in first. He sees the linen cloths and comes out again. But it is the beloved disciple, going in to the tomb, who sees and believes. This allows him, later on

the lake, to make the ecstatic pronouncement, "It is the Lord." He then conclude his book so profoundly. He concludes in a way that is both personal and inviting to us.

There are two endings. The weaker is ending two. "There were many other things that Jesus did. If they were all recorded, the world itself could not contain the books which would be written." (As a writer I like the idea that there are still books needing to be written.) But the earlier ending is perfect: "Jesus did many other signs which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is messiah and Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

Nothing much more can be said about the risen Christ. Except perhaps that the life being referred to is more than breathing, more than existing. It is "life in all its fullness."