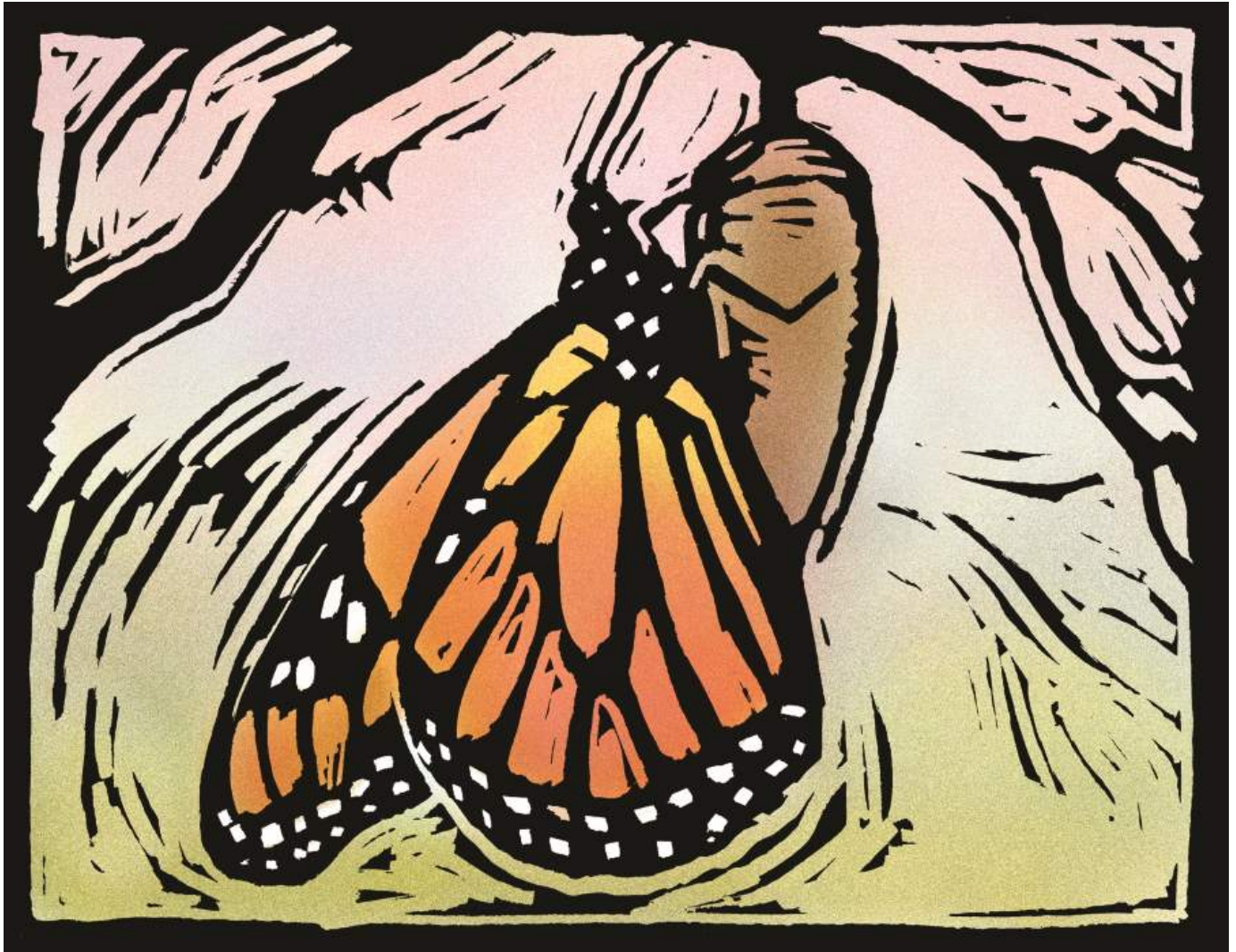


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As the priest-uncle in a large, Irish-Catholic family, I enjoy leafing through my extended family's photo albums. Those albums document the transformations that each of my 12 nieces and nephews, who range in age from 16 to 46, have experienced.

There are numerous photographs of blissfully sleeping infants, perched on the shoulder of their equally blissful priest-uncle, who himself has fallen asleep in the rocking chair. In the next photo, the infant is now a toddler, and the priest-uncle is trying to distract the youngster by reading *The Cat in the Hat*. A few pages later in the photo album, the toddler, by now five or six, is dressed for the first day of school. Soon photos appear of nieces and nephews in soccer or hockey gear, triumphant at having won the latest match. Flip the page, and the former third-grader is now 12 or 14, sporting braces and a wide grin. Flip the page again, and the now 17-year-old, is dressed for the prom, smiling into the camera. Graduation pictures come next, and the proud parents flank the newly minted scholar, who looks more than ready to shed the mortarboard and academic regalia. Wedding photographs evoke memories of beautiful brides and handsome grooms, resplendent in their wedding attire, surrounded by their friends and family, and joined by their priest-uncle, now more wrinkled, more gray, and more jowly than he was when he rocked the babies and himself to sleep so many years earlier.

Life is about transformations, and for most of us, the transformations take place so gradually and in such slow motion that we are hardly aware of the changes that are taking place. It is only by opening up albums of family photos that we see the contrast between the past and the present, between then and now.

Those transformations are not merely physical. The difference between the infants in the first pages of the photo album and the young marrieds in the later pages is not simply a difference in height and weight. The children have grown into adulthood, and in the process, have gained wisdom and understanding, have become more generous and other-directed, have learned the meaning of compassion and love. But these moral and spiritual transformations from infancy to adulthood for the most part take place slowly and almost imperceptibly.

Occasionally, however, something transpires in our lives, and we are transformed abruptly, dramatically and completely. So, it was for the eleven on that first Easter. Their Master had been arrested, tried, tortured, executed and buried hastily; and they, fearful of suffering the same fate, hid themselves in the back alleys and tenements of Jerusalem (Mark 14:50; Matthew 26:56). And then, three days after the Lord's death, the most astounding news reached them — Jesus has been raised to new life (Matthew 28:8; Luke 24:9-12; John 20:1-10, 18).

Jesus and the resurrection

In the narratives that we ponder during the Easter season, transformations abound. First of all, Jesus is transformed. On Good Friday, we call to mind the bruised and battered body of Jesus, betrayed by one of his closest associates (Mark 14:43-45; Matthew 26:47-50; Luke 22:47-48; John 18:1-9), sorrowfully laid in the borrowed tomb (Mark 15:42-46; Matthew 27:57-60; Luke 23:50-53; John 19:38-42), and deserted by virtually everyone save a few faithful women (Mark 15:47; Matthew 27:61; Luke 23:55-56).

On Easter Sunday, the risen Lord emerges from the tomb, heralded by angels (Matthew 28:7; Luke 24:4-7), speaking words of reassurance and peace to his disciples (Matthew 28:9; Luke 24:36; John 20:19). He still bears the marks of his torture (Luke 24:39-40; John 20:20, 27), but he is no longer bound by pain. He can suddenly appear before the disciples (Luke 24:36-37), even though the doors are locked (John 20:19, 26); he is both different and familiar, simultaneously a stranger and a friend (Luke 24:13-35; John 20:11-18).

The Christian Scriptures depict the transformation of Jesus at his resurrection not just in narrative, but also in song. The Christ Hymn, found in Paul's Letter to the Philippians, depicts the transformation of Jesus by contrasting his incarnate state to his exalted status. The hymn ascribes a descending and ascending pattern to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Originating in God, he empties himself of any privilege to which he has claim, endures suffering and death, and returns to God with "the name that is above every name" (Philippians 2:9b).

In the first stanza of the hymn, Jesus is described in terms of his abandonment of any privilege and his self-emptying:

Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God something to be grasped.

Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness;

and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to the death,

even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:6-8)

The Lord's willingness to engage in self-emptying (kenosis in Greek) culminates in his crucifixion, but does not begin there. For Paul, the dynamic of self-abandonment begins with the Incarnation itself, when the all-powerful One embraces all the limitations of human life, including the most painful and shameful death Paul could have imagined — death on a cross.

The second stanza of the Christ Hymn describes the risen Lord in terms of exaltation, an exaltation that is bestowed upon Jesus precisely because he has not sought it:

Because of this, God greatly exalted him

and bestowed on him the name

that is above every name,

that at the name of Jesus

every knee should bend,

of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

and every tongue confess that

Jesus Christ is Lord,

to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:9-11)

Christ's resurrection, in Paul's understanding, reverses the downward spiral of Jesus' passion and death, and places Jesus at the very pinnacle of existence, evoking the praise of every sector of creation — "in heaven and on earth and under the earth" — for the risen Lord, and for God who has thus exalted him.

The disciples and the resurrection of Jesus

In all four Gospels, the transformation of Jesus by his resurrection means that the proclamation of the inbreaking of the reign of God, hitherto confined to Galilee and Judea, will henceforth extend to the ends of the earth. In the post-resurrection appearances of the Lord to his disciples, he typically gives them a mandate:

Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature. (Mark 16:15)

Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. (Matthew 28:19)

Thus, it is written that the Messiah would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance, for the forgiveness of sins, would be preached in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. (Luke 24:46-48)

As the Father has sent me, so I send you ... Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained. (John 20:21-23)

In accepting this mandate, the disciples are themselves transformed. For the most part, their transformation from cowardice to bravery and from lying to forthright witness is testified in the Acts of the Apostles, selections from which are found in the first reading for the Sundays of Easter. The portrait of Peter in Acts is particularly noteworthy for the way in which he has been transformed.

The Acts of the Apostles is, of course, the second volume of a two-part work, the first volume of which is the Gospel according to Luke. In Luke's account of the Passion, Peter is rather less than impressive.

In Chapter 22 of Luke's Gospel, we encounter the following sequence: Jesus foretells his coming death during his last supper at a presumably a solemn and affecting occasion (14-20); Peter, along with the other disciples, argues over which of the Twelve should be considered the greatest (24-30); in the garden on the Mount of Olives, while Jesus is in such agony that his sweat becomes like drops of blood falling on the ground (44); Peter and the other disciples take a nap (45); after Jesus is arrested, Peter denies knowing Jesus three times (54-62).

His bumptious and cowardly behavior may well have been a function of his youth. While we typically think of Peter as a balding, middle-aged man, thanks to his depiction over centuries of Christian art and iconography, the reality is that he was probably no more than 18 or 20 years old, since his mother-in-law was still alive in the early days of the Lord's ministry (Luke 5:38-39). Life-expectancy in the first century is commonly estimated to have been 45 years of age, and if Peter's mother-in-law was still alive, although sickly (Luke 5:38b), Peter cannot have been much more than a lad in late adolescence. Similar arguments can be advanced with respect to the ages of James and John, the sons of Zebedee, whose parents were also both alive (Mark 1:20; Matthew 20:20).

Peter's youth, then, makes his transformation into an honest and courageous spokesman for the nascent Christian movement all the more impressive. In his speeches to the people of Jerusalem and their leaders (Acts 2:14-36; 3:12-26; 4:8-12), Peter displays an unexpected directness and nerve, in contrast to his timorous behavior during the arrest and trial of Jesus. His speeches are surprisingly eloquent, considering his modest origins as a Galilean fisherman.

In Acts 3:12-26, for instance, parts of which we read on the Third Sunday of Easter, Peter does not sugarcoat the seriousness of Jesus' death:

The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors, has glorified his servant Jesus whom you handed over and denied in Pilate's presence, when he had decided to release him. You denied the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. The author of life you put to death... (Acts 3:13-15a)

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But Peter does not only confront and reprimand, he also consoles and encourages:

Now I know, brothers [and sisters] that you acted out of ignorance, just as your leaders did; but God has thus brought to fulfillment what he had announced beforehand through the mouth of all the prophets that his Messiah would suffer. Repent, therefore, and be converted that your sins may be wiped away. (Acts 3:17-19)

His message is one of repentance, and it echoes the preaching of Jesus (Mark 1:15; Matthew 4:17) in which repentance (metanoia in Greek) means more than just ceasing to engage in misconduct. Metanoia involves a transformation on at least three levels: (1) a transformation of my way of seeing, (2) a transformation of my relationships, and (3) a transformation of my hopes. This threefold transformation is at the heart of the Gospel. If I see someone differently — no longer as an enemy, but as a friend — then I begin to relate to that person differently. And in relating to my (former) enemy differently, I can begin to hope for a better world, one in which old wounds are finally healed, ancient injustices finally rectified, and the reconciliation of ancient enmities finally achieved.

The community and the resurrection of Jesus

The transformations to which the Acts of the Apostles gives witness are not confined simply to individuals like Peter. The community of faith itself is transformed by what God has done in Jesus. To a contemporary American, perhaps the most striking thing about this nascent community is its willingness to pool limited resources for the common good:

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one's need. Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart, praising God and enjoying favor with all the people. (Acts 2:44-47a)

The community of believers was of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common. ... There was no needy person among them, for those who owned property or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds of the sale, and put them at the feet of the apostles, and they were distributed to each according to need. (Acts 4:32-35)

To the inhabitants of first-century Jerusalem, however, the most remarkable characteristic about these earliest followers of Jesus was their prayerfulness. Luke tells us how important the regular practice of prayer was in the life of this community of faith:

They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers. (Acts 2:42)

The phrase "the breaking of the bread" might refer to the eucharistic liturgies of the community; though, it is also possible that it refers to the practice of communal meal-taking. The prayers (proseuchais in Greek) to which Luke refers is probably the practice of praying the psalms at regular intervals during the course of the day, a practice that would have been adapted from the Jewish practice of singing the psalms while going on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. These earliest followers of Jesus seem to have seen their lives as a kind of continual pilgrimage, the destination of which is the transformative encounter with God.

This transformed community, thanks to the twin witness of charity and prayer, continues to attract new members. Luke takes special pains to point out how quickly the community of faith is growing:

And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2:47b)

But many of those who heard the word came to believe and (the) number of men grew to [about] five thousand. (Acts 4:4)

Yet more than ever, believers in the Lord, great numbers of men and women, were added to them. (Acts 5:14)

The word of God continued to spread, and the number of the disciples in

Jerusalem increased greatly; even a large group of priests were becoming obedient to the faith. (Acts 6:7)

The twofold witness of compassion and prayer served then, as it serves today, as means to bring the human race into a transformative encounter with God. The power of that kind of witness should not be underestimated, even if many Christians today display a kind of modesty about their acts of compassion and their lives of prayer. The earliest followers of Jesus were convinced that since God had raised Jesus from the dead, everything must henceforth be different, and that they were called to make that difference palpable in the ways in which they conducted their lives.

Resurrection and transformation

The resurrection of Jesus, and its consequent effect upon Peter and the other followers of Jesus, invites us — we who live two millennia later plus half a world away — to hope for our own transformation. The kind of transformation for which we hope is not simply a consequence of time and nature, the way my nieces and nephews have grown to adulthood. The transformation promised by the Lord's resurrection is a "new heaven and a new earth. ... [where God] will wipe every tear from their eyes. ... and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, for the old order has passed away" (Revelation 21:1-4).

The hope of Easter is the hope for a renewed world, a world of peace and justice, a world of compassion and goodness, a world of mercy, faith and truth.

Editor's note: *This reflection was originally published in the April 2018 issue of [Celebration](#). Sign up to receive [daily Easter reflections](#).*

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