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The most important detail in Luke's accounts of the disciples meeting the risen Jesus may be the fact that he slowly opened their minds to understand what they had previously been unwilling or unable to grasp. Their facile and self-interested ideas about Jesus as Lord or Messiah all fell apart with the Passion. Those of us born into a so-called Christian society may unwittingly share their lack of depth of understanding. We sometimes proclaim: "He was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day" with about the same amount of wonder as we say "the light just turned green." When we read the Gospels, it is all too easy to overlook the mind-boggling confusion they convey and thus avoid their invitation to undergo the transformation they offer. To the extent that we succeed in those evasions, we prevent ourselves from sharing the faith experience of an encounter with Christ that the evangelists wanted to communicate.

Sometimes we enter into the stories we hear from Scripture as if they were played out with all the serious solemnity of a papal funeral. That approach can both shroud the fact that people genuinely enjoyed being with Jesus and erase the impact of his great sense of humor. Jesus was well-known for his proficiency as the come-back artist. His great one-liners included challenging the righteous that they'd better remove the 2-by-4 from their eyes before going after a speck in someone else's, as well as challenging the Pharisees with the observation that while straining to avoid ingesting a gnat they were swallowing a camel (Luke 6:42, Matthew 23:24). He never let his followers take themselves too seriously.

Remembering what the earthly Jesus was really like, it seems at least remotely possible that when Jesus suddenly materialized in the midst of his disciples on the night of his resurrection, he might have been at least tempted to startle them with a resounding "Boo!"

Luke quotes Jesus as saying "Peace be with you," but that greeting apparently had exactly the same effect as if he had plotted and carried off a plan to make them jump right out of their sandals. Luke says the disciples were "startled and terrified." That sounds like a progression from bad to worse. When their good sense kicked in, they figured that they were seeing a phantom. (So much for giving your friends a wonderful surprise ...)

When we read the Resurrection accounts without supplementary overlays of piety and unquestioned faith, we can start to comprehend how hard it was for the disciples to understand the risen Christ. That is simply because the Resurrection fulfilled everything Jesus had tried to teach them during his ministry but they had never grasped it. They had loved him, but their faith was never more than a ghost of his own. The risen Jesus had to begin by convincing them that he himself

had returned to them and that he was truly alive; they could see the scars of his suffering and just as he had done throughout their life together, he could eat with them.

Luke tells us that Jesus nudged his friends through their incredulity and amazement to the point that he could open their minds to understand the Scriptures. The Gospels attest to the fact that until they had been through Jesus' death and resurrection, they did not and perhaps could not understand what he had tried to teach them. It was one thing to hear him proclaim that the last would be first; it was quite another for them to meet their crucified friend arisen from the dead. They had often heard him preach metanoia and forgiveness, but they began to learn what it meant when he transformed their way of thinking by returning to them with his message of peace. In the end, Jesus mandated his disciples to be his witnesses. He knew that the only way they could learn what his message was about was through preaching it in word and deed.

Thus, in today's reading from Acts, we meet the new Peter. No longer the braggart, he is a witness. As a prophet, he demands that his people accept their responsibility for crucifying Jesus. As an evangelist, he has become a preacher and agent of forgiveness, even ready to risk his skin for the message that has captivated him. On one hand, people might not recognize him; on another, they would say he had become what he was always meant to be.

In the end, Easter is God's invitation that we all become what we are meant to be in and through the encounter with the risen Christ. All the saints will tell us that the process involves terrible confusion and frightening realizations that prod us beyond our safe boundaries and easy creeds. They will also tell us that the peace we will find is worth any cost.

ACTS 3:13-15, 17-19

Luke presents the homily we hear in this Sunday's reading as Peter's response to the crowds who gathered in amazement after seeing him heal a lame beggar. Realizing that he had an audience captivated by his wondrous feat, Peter launched into an explanation about everything that was happening through the name and power of the crucified and risen Jesus. His preaching would have made the prophets proud.

Peter situated his message squarely in his people's ancient tradition by proclaiming that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had glorified Jesus. After assuring them of his solidarity in their shared tradition, Peter went on to harangue his people over their ignorant and vicious persecution of Jesus. Reminding them that they had chosen a murderer over the "Holy and Righteous One" he drove his point home with the purposely provocative phrase, "The author of life you put to death." Having riveted their attention with that accusation, he explained how futile their machinations had turned out to be. He showed them how, without their knowledge or consent, God had worked through them to accomplish a divine purpose far beyond their wildest imaginings.

With this switch of focus, Peter showed them how God's way of being and acting differed from their own practice and expectations. Peter explained how God had been the master of their redemption, transforming the raw material of human folly and real evil into grace and salvation. Proclaiming that God raised the one they put to death and glorified the one they handed over, Peter attempted to get them to see all that had happened from a radically different point of view.

As he described what God had done in Jesus, Peter reinterpreted the history of Israel for his audience. Just as Jesus had done for the disciples traveling to Emmaus, Peter explained how the prophets had foretold what God would accomplish through Jesus. Echoing Isaiah who said "Who would believe what we have heard?" (53:1), Peter explained how the Scriptures could have prepared them to recognize Jesus if only they had known how to read them.

Of course, the stumbling block for them and just about everyone was the idea of a messiah who would suffer. Such a messiah presented an unnerving concept of God's power as transformative rather than coercive. The suffering messiah portrayed God's power as love willing to suffer rejection rather than overpower anyone. Peter preached the scandalous idea that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of the prophets, had indeed sent Jesus and when he was rejected that same God raised him up so that he could return to his people offering forgiveness. Part of the difficulty of accepting the suffering messiah is that our image of God tells us what we should be like. People who believe in the God of Jesus are called to choose mercy over sacrifice or punishment. Peter finished his homily by calling people to turn their lives around and accept forgiveness.

PSALMS 4:2, 4, 7-8, 9

This psalm reflects the growing hope of an Easter people. It begins as a prayer of someone in real distress who clings to the hope that God will attend to their cry. The delicate balance between deeply felt need and hope carries through the whole of Verse 2 and is underlined as we repeat the plea, “Lord, let your face shine on us.”

The second strophe expresses growing confidence. As we recall the times when we have felt God’s help, our memories inspire our own hopeful proclamation that God will never fail to hear us. Given the themes of this Sunday, we might dwell on a time when we ourselves have experienced God’s power to transform evil into grace and death into life.

The third strophe fills out the refrain, “Lord, let your face shine on us.” We might begin meditating on this line by considering the way people look on those they deeply love: parents watching over their newborn, a bride and groom holding each other with their eyes, or long-separated friends delighted to see one another again. These are reflections of God’s loving gaze on us. As we allow ourselves to believe in God’s pleasure in beholding us, we will be filled with a joy like that of Jesus at his baptism when he heard the heavenly voice proclaim, “You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased.”

The final strophe completes the transition from fragile hope to the confidence born of faith. Knowing God’s great love, we can sleep peacefully, confident that the one who raised Jesus overcomes evil and will ever be with us to transform danger, sorrow and suffering into grace.

1 JOHN 2:1-5a

The First Letter of John seems to have been written to counter some heretical trends in the early community. The author takes pains to call the readers to authenticity in their faith. The selection opens with a very pastoral message encouraging people not to sin, but quickly assuring them that no matter what, they need never despair because sinners always have Christ as their advocate.

The next line proclaims that Christ “is expiation for our sins.” While that could sound like a notion that belongs to the world of sacrifice to appease angry gods, the word translated as expiation actually has its roots in the vocabulary of mercy. Referring to Christ as expiation for sin depicts him as God’s most personal offer of mercy. Saying that Christ is expiation for the sins of the whole world proclaims that God’s offer of mercy is unlimited by time, place or religious denomination.

That idea sheds light on the next sentence which says that to know Christ is to keep his commandments. The core commandment in John’s theology is love. The person who has known and received divine mercy is someone in whom love has been planted and can flower. The more someone has experienced mercy, the more they are also impelled to exercise it. As John puts it, the person who has received mercy and keeps God’s command is a person in whom the love of God is becoming perfected.

LUKE 24:35-48

Today’s Gospel begins with the assumption that we have just listened to the story of the disciples who encountered Jesus at the table in Emmaus. Hearing the passage begin this way reminds us that in Luke’s Gospel the disciples’ first encounter with the risen Lord took place in the context of word and sacrament; they heard Jesus reinterpret the Scriptures and recognized him in the self-gift implied in the breaking of the bread.

Another thing we realize when today’s appearance story is understood in the context of the testimony of the Emmaus disciples is that the disciples’ faith in the Resurrection was far from an easy or immediate process. They heard Jesus’ words, they saw and even touched him and they remained confused — as today’s Gospel admitted, “they were still incredulous for joy and were amazed.”

The centerpiece of this scene is Jesus’ appearance to “the eleven and those with them.” This is the second time in the resurrection accounts that Luke points out that the disciples were a fragmented group (24:9, 33). This reminds us of the

emergent community's fragile faith. The core group of 12 representatives of what could have been a new Israel, was incomplete and with them were unnamed, unnumbered others who heard and saw everything that the remaining apostles heard and saw. The very composition of this group indicated that something new was happening; the community gathered in Jesus' name was not Israel, but a remnant augmented by the presence of women and men willing to be open to God's unsettling but life-giving activity in their midst.

Most commentators look at this as the third appearance of the risen Lord in Luke's Gospel. The first was the appearance to the disciples fleeing from Jerusalem to Emmaus. The second, which is mentioned but never described, is an appearance to Peter — a reference that sounds like an account of what should have happened, even if nobody ever knew the particulars of the story. What ultimately comes through in the details of the resurrection accounts is confusion and slow growth in understanding. Because Luke was so intent on conveying the community's mystified state of mind, it must still be important for us today.

As Luke sets up this appearance narrative, just when some of the group in Jerusalem were saying that the Lord had appeared to Peter, the Emmaus travelers explained their experience. Luke almost gives the impression that everyone was talking at once when Jesus suddenly materialized in their midst and greeted them with peace.

Understandably, their first response was anything but joy — in fact, Luke uses two distinct words to describe their reaction of fear and then adds that they thought they were seeing a ghost. This gives us a pretty clear idea of how much faith they had put in what they had just heard recounted from Peter and the two who had returned from Emmaus.

Seeing that his greeting of peace had not calmed their anxiety, Jesus asked his friends to search their hearts and to let their senses confirm that he was no phantasm, but the companion they had known and had seen suffer. Still trying to vanquish their incredulity, Jesus asked to eat with them just as he had done with the two he stayed with at Emmaus.

Then, admitting that his presence among them was different from what it was before his death, he tried to help bridge the gap by returning to his role as teacher. In effect he said, "I am telling you again what I tried to get you to understand so many times before." He then gave them the three essential keys to understanding his mission and preaching: God's Messiah was not what they expected, but the one who suffered and rose from the dead; conversion and forgiveness would be preached in his name; his disciples had the responsibility to spread that message from its birthplace in the heart of Israel to the entire world.

The message of the Resurrection, the message of the salvation and forgiveness offered by a crucified and risen Savior, is not easy to take in or live out. All four evangelists portray the difficulty of grasping the message. The paschal mystery overturns all ordinary expectations and controverts normal human ambitions. The Gospel privileges sinners who gratefully accept forgiveness over anyone who tries to earn their own way. If we have little problem believing the message of Easter, perhaps we have not even begun to understand it.

Planning: 3rd Sunday of Easter

By: Lawrence Mick

In today's second reading, the First Letter of John raises the possibility that we might sin. Of course, we know it's not just a possibility. Sin is, unfortunately, a part of our lives — less frequent or more frequent, less serious or more serious, but honesty requires admitting that we are all sinners.

That's not good news, though, is it? The good news is that "we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one." What does the Advocate do for us? He pleads our case, not trying to deny that we have sinned, but reminding the Father that we are sons and daughters, weak human beings who are in constant need of mercy. And constant mercy is what God offers us.

I wonder how well your neophytes understand this. There is a natural tendency for those who have just gone through an extensive conversion process to feel that they have left sin behind — and that's certainly the goal! But they remain

human, so sin will rear its ugly head again. We do trust that they will not embrace serious sin or return to their former way of life, but none of us is perfect. If the newly baptized expect that they will be able to avoid all sin, if they seek for that kind of perfection, they will be disappointed and perhaps disillusioned.

This might be a good week for the parish formation team to meet with the neophytes to talk about the sacrament of penance. It might be beneficial to plan a penance service for them soon, perhaps before Pentecost or soon after. We would not expect them to have serious sins to confess, but it is important that they become comfortable with this sacrament and learn to approach it as an aid to continuing conversion of life.

This could also be a Sunday to offer some mystagogy on the penitential rite at the beginning of Mass. Do your people really understand what we are doing in that brief rite? Do some see it as a substitute for the sacrament of penance? Do some experience it as a time to castigate themselves and feel guilty?

It really should be a moment to recognize that we are able to gather together as church because of God's mercy. We do not come simply of our own accord. We are called by God and initiated into the body of Christ, not because we are worthy but because God is ever-merciful. It should be a moment to remember God's love and mercy more than a moment to focus on our sins. It should prompt joy and gratitude rather than guilt.

The presider might help this understanding to develop simply by inviting people to "call to mind God's mercy" rather than to "call to mind our sins."

Prayers: 3rd Sunday of Easter

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

Celebrating Easter is more than belief; it involves action on our part. If we really believe that Christ is risen and among us, it will be reflected tangibly in how we live. It may be expressed differently in each of us, but it will be evident. Luckily, his final words to us are about repentance and forgiveness, so we don't need to be perfect. But if we truly believe, those who encounter us will know it.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you opened the hearts and minds of those whom you encountered: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you are risen and among us even now: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to be witnesses and to keep your commandments: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray that we may reflect the presence of Christ in all that we say and do.

Minister That the church may be a clear, credible witness to the resurrected Christ through our love and mercy toward one another ... we pray,

- For the impact of our witness on political decisions both domestically and internationally, especially on issues of peace and justice ... we pray,
- For our country especially in places where there is internal strife, for those circumstances where it is difficult to admit mistakes, ask forgiveness or forgive one another; and for those who work to heal those divisions ... we pray,

- For the serenity that comes when the Lord's gladness fills our hearts and for the grace to reflect that joy to others ... we pray,
- For those who are reluctant to change; and for those who have been too wounded to grant forgiveness, especially within our families ... we pray,
- For the desire to heal any divisiveness within this community; and for those among us who are sick, dying, grieving or in any kind of need ... we pray,

Presider God of abiding love and mercy, we thank you for calling us to stretch beyond our limitations and to live as witnesses to your risen Son. Help us to live as repentant, forgiven, loving members of Christ's body. In God's name we pray. Amen.

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