NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

A new perspective

Mary M. McGlone Illustration by Mark Bartholomew | Mar. 30, 2013 Spiritual Reflections

On Easter morn we naturally expect to hear Christ?s disciples leading us in an alleluia chorus, filled with joy at the Resurrection. For that, we would have done better to attend the Easter Vigil with its history of salvation, the singing of the Exultet and the angels? announcement that Christ had been raised. What a comedown to hear this morning?s Gospel proclamation of the disciples? disconcerted confusion! If we consider our readings in their historical order, we may catch on to the fact that they are introducing us to a process of faith development that recommences annually with a 50-day period of contemplating the mystery of Easter.

First, the Gospel proclaims the mysterious news that the tomb was neat and empty, and the disciples were, at best, bewildered. Second, Peter preaches the basic outline of the good news of Jesus? life, death and resurrection. Third, some 25 or more years later, Paul (or someone writing in his name) exhorted the Colossians to allow Christ?s resurrection to be the prism through which they would understand their lives.

The Johannine narrative is not really a story about Jesus, but about the disciples? gradual apprehension of what he meant for them and the world. We begin with Mary Magdalene, Jesus? most faithful friend. While John described the crucifixion as the culmination of Jesus? mission (?It is finished?), what Mary saw that Good Friday was only his excruciating death. Thus John tells us that her pilgrimage to the tomb took place ?while it was dark? -- an apt description of her mind and heart.

What did she see? She saw that the tomb was exposed to the light. She ran to Peter and the beloved disciple to notify them of the new dimension of their tragedy: ?They have taken the Lord from the tomb and we don?t know where they put him.? As the reader knows, the only factual part of that statement was ?we don?t know.?

When the disciples arrived, Peter ventured into the place of death. There, instead of a stench, instead of a cadaver, he found the sheets carefully arranged and the cloth used to bind Jesus? jaw folded and put aside, cryptic evidence that the trappings of death were now obsolete. We hear that Peter ?saw? and that the beloved ?saw and believed.? Interestingly, John describes what they saw, but does not explain what the disciple believed.

In Acts, Luke presents us with Peter?s third and most polished sermon about the meaning and message of Jesus. Peter describes Jesus as God?s anointed one -- a phrase laden with messianic implications. Explaining what that

meant in practice, he said that Jesus did good and healed those oppressed by the devil.

From there, Peter focused on disciples. They were the ones who saw Jesus? works. Just as Peter saw the signs of the Resurrection, the disciples saw all that Jesus did, but did not understand it. Their encounters with him after he rose, and especially their Communion meals with him, became their key to revelation. Only when Jesus had sought them out and loved them precisely as his failed disciples, did they begin to comprehend the meaning of his mission. Only when they had recognized and accepted themselves as forgiven sinners could they preach forgiveness of sin in his name.

Finally, we come to Paul?s message to the Colossians. Paul wanted to lead the community to comprehend their own baptism as a real participation in the death and resurrection of Christ. Telling them to ?seek what is above,? Paul was not suggesting a flight from the world, but rather a way of seeing everything from the perspective of their new life in Christ.

The Easter readings depict belief in the risen Lord not as a once and for all revelation, but as a long process. As all of the Gospels attest, the Resurrection was hardly an indubitable sign or faith-compelling event. Throughout our lives we are invited to listen to and identify with those first witnesses. Mary Magdalene will remind us that only when we admit ?we don?t know? are we open to the revelation of what we could not imagine. Peter will show us how to turn our backs on our infidelity and fear so that we can become forgiven evangelizers. As beloved disciples, we will continually grow in seeing and believing a mystery that we cannot explain. That is the mystery that Paul wants us to live out, allowing baptism into Christ?s death and resurrection to open us to a new vantage point, understanding all of creation in relation to Christ.

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Source URL (retrieved on *10/28/2016 - 11:29*): https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/spiritual-reflections/new-perspective