

With the miracle and wonder of Easter still a recent and very pleasant memory, we would do well to ponder Easter's enduring appeal. Most churches attract twice as many worshipers for Easter services as they do on a typical Sunday. In the pews on Easter, and often rubbing elbows with one another, are the faithful, habitual and the curious, the believers, the skeptics and the spiritually sensitive and less sensitive.

Why do they all come on Easter; and why do so few of them return on the Sundays that follow? Undoubtedly, some come because of custom or convention. These days attending church is no longer fashionable as it once was, it is no longer a social convention, a place to meet your mate, play sport or have your children entertained. Therefore we may have less quantitatively but we may more likely have more qualitatively. Others come because they're in town for the weekend visiting family or friends, still others to appease a spouse or set a good example for a child. To be fair about it, though, most people come to church at Easter because they want to reacquaint with this outlandish story about Jesus rising from the dead, and they want to know deep down whether or not it is true, to give it an annual go. The music, the liturgy, the beautiful church bring back sweet memories of childhood, of the familiar - a constant in an ever changing world. So they come, believers and skeptics alike, hoping to be inspired by the beautiful music, hoping to catch the enthusiasm of the bigger group of people, hoping to re-live past memories hoping that the preacher is up to scratch, not too long and deep down will give them some plausible proof that Christ is not dead but alive. "Is he really alive?" we all secretly wonder, "and if so, how can we recognise his presence in our midst and in our confusing world?"

In one of its memorable scriptures, the Church offers a simple, straightforward answer to these questions. Chapter 24 of Luke tells us about two of Jesus' disciples walking along the road to Emmaus. It is the afternoon of the first Easter, and like us, these two disciples had heard a claim about Jesus rising from the dead. "Could it be true?" they wonder as they walk along the way. "Is it possible that Jesus is not dead but alive? But he was crucified," they say arguing with their own sensibilities, "crucified, dead and buried. When you're dead, you're dead. This rumour of resurrection can't be true, can it? Is it anything more than 'an idle tale'?" (Luke 24:11).

While they were talking about these things, the Risen Christ came near and went with them but, says Luke, "their eyes were kept from recognising him" (Luke 24:16). Something kept them from recognising him, but what could that something be? Maybe that something had to do with Christ himself. Maybe something about his appearance kept them from recognising him. After all, this is not the only time when the disciples fail to recognise the Risen Christ. When the Risen Christ appears to Mary outside the garden tomb, she fails to recognise him — she mistakes him for the gardener — until he calls her by name (John 20:14-16). When the disciples are out in the boat fishing all night long with not a single fish to show for their efforts, the Risen Christ stands on the beach and calls out to them, "but," says John, "the disciples did not know that it was Jesus" (John 21:4). Maybe that something that kept the disciples from recognising the Risen Christ had to do with Christ himself — his resurrected appearance, demeanour, countenance.

On the other hand, maybe that something that kept them from recognising him had more to do with them than with him. Could that be true for us today as modern disciples coming in straggling through the church door weighed down by cynicism, stress, pretence, power ... We, like the first disciples, yearn for the living presence of God. But we are too preoccupied, too suspicious, too busy to actually recognise God. In our objective world of fact and truth and matter and money, the church's world of mystery and meaning and risk and relationship seems silly.

Whatever it was, something kept them from recognising him. And so they speak to him — this incognito Christ — as if he were a stranger. They recite to him their litany of lament. They tell him about: "Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his

body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.” — Luke 24:19

After the two disciples recite their litany, Jesus interprets the scriptures for them. Later, when they arrive at their destination, Jesus appears to be going further, but they invite him into the house to have something to eat. As they sit down at the table, suddenly the guest becomes the host and Jesus takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them. At that moment, a moment of wide-eyed wonder, they recognise him in the breaking of the bread. Then, they get up and return to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples about their experience with the Risen Christ.

The reason the early Church remembered this story and preserved it in its scriptures is because it bears a remarkable resemblance to what we Christians do on every Sunday of the church year — namely, gather in a place like this to worship.

Notice how the events unfold. These two Christians are walking along the way. Incidentally, the early Christians often spoke of themselves as “people of the way,” and here are these two walking along “the way” or the road. As they walk along, the Risen Christ comes into their midst. They summarise the gospel for him. He, in turn, interprets the gospel for them. Then they sit at table and break bread. And in the midst of that - call to worship, scripture, sermon, communion - in the midst of something as dull and drab as Sunday worship, their eyes are opened and they recognise the Risen Christ in their midst. No wonder they get up from the table and go out to tell others about their experience.

Of course, most of us want something more than an experience of the Risen Christ. We want some mighty and majestic proof positive that Christ has been raised from the dead. We want objective truth. But most preachers realise that we have none to offer. Do you know, for example, that the Risen Christ never appears in the New Testament to anyone other than his friends and followers? Don't you wonder what might have happened had he appeared to Pontius Pilate, to Pilate's wife who had the dream about Jesus, or maybe even to Caiaphas, the Jewish high priest? Don't you wonder how different things would have been had the Risen Christ appeared to people like that? But the New Testament doesn't indulge us with such fantasy. Instead, we hear one story after another about how Christ appeared to his friends, to those who had taken the time to know him, learn from him, love him, and serve him.

Perhaps this message comes as a disappointment to some of you. Undoubtedly, it would disappoint many of the curious who throng to church each year on Easter. What they want - and what many of us want as well - is proof, proof positive that Christ has been raised from the dead. Strangely, this sacred story offers no such proof. Rather, it gives us a glimpse of the simple conviction that sincere believers have had from the very beginning. When Christians gather to talk about the scriptures, hear them interpreted, and break bread with one another, miracle of miracles, our eyes are opened and we recognise the Risen Christ in their midst.

Christ is risen! We know that to be true, and we should proclaim it with every breath we possess even if we can't prove it. But, it's true, nevertheless, because we have experienced his living presence, not primarily on the golf course, or in some backyard garden, or at the beach, or when beholding a beautiful sunset. Rather, we have experienced his presence in the midst of other Christians who are doing nothing more spectacular than talking about the scriptures, hearing them interpreted, breaking bread with one another, and then going out into the world to tell others about our experience. Then, like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, we too will be able to say that Christ has been made known to us in the breaking of the bread.

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