

On the road to Emmaus
John Docherty, April 26, 2020

I've always been struck by the ambiguity that seems to be present with virtually every post-resurrection sighting of Jesus that's recorded in the Gospels.

Mary mistakes him for the gardener;

The disciples in the upper room think they've seen a ghost;

The disciples on the road to Emmaus simply think they've met up with a stranger who is able to explain messianic prophecies to them;

We're told in John's gospel that as for Simon Peter and the other disciples who meet him on the beach "Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, 'Who are you?' because they knew it was the Lord."

Now that description of their reaction suggests to *me* that, although they didn't dare ask him "who are you", there was enough doubt that the question would have been a fair one.

Even when he meets them on the mountain in Galilee, according to Matthew's account some of them still doubted.

Add to that the fact that the appearances seem to be random – that Jesus just shows up with no apparent rhyme or reason to the occasions – and you have to wonder what's going on.

There's no clear, definitive, process by which Jesus now makes his resurrection known;

no apparent organization to his appearances;

no apparent plan for spreading the word.

He simply pops up from time to time; only occasionally doing so in a way that leaves no doubt that he is who he is.

That said, it doesn't really strike me as odd at all that there is ambiguity at play here.

I think that any rational person, even any rational person of 2,000 years ago, would question whether they were actually in the living presence of someone they had seen crucified and killed with their own eyes.

What *does* strike me as odd, is the fact that the gospel writers acknowledge this ambiguity.

As apologists for this new movement of faith, you'd think that they would downplay any questionable elements of Jesus' resurrection and underline the fact that he'd appeared to so many, rather than underline the fact that those who saw him had their doubts.

You'd think they'd limit themselves to simply saying he appeared to so and so at such and such a time and place and said this and that.

Why insert an element of doubt, when you're trying to convince people that this really happened?

I suppose it could be explained as an honest attempt to be faithful to what actually happened :

- The disciples *did* have their own doubts about what they were seeing;
- They were *confused* about what was going on;

I suppose another explanation could be that the gospel writers knew that the people reading their accounts would have their own doubts about Jesus' resurrection and that this is a way of reassuring them that that's understandable - even Jesus' closest disciples couldn't believe their own eyes at first.

It's simply not normal for people to rise from the dead, although they'd been witness to a couple of other resurrections already – Lazarus and the widow of Nain's son. But I suppose it's one thing to bring someone back from the dead – it's a whole other level of amazing to bring *yourself* back from the dead.

And yet, believe their own eyes they ultimately did.

I think I suggested in another meditation a few years ago that I wondered if this wasn't a way for Jesus to set the tone for the idea that we should be prepared to see Jesus' face in the face of all those around us.

In other words, are these appearances a quite literal demonstration of what he means in chapter 25 of Matthew's Gospel?

“for I was hungry and you gave me food,
I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,
I was a stranger and you welcomed me,
I was naked and you gave me clothing,
I was sick and you took care of me,
I was in prison and you visited me.”

Then the righteous will answer him,
“Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?
And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you,
or naked and gave you clothing?
And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?”

And the king will answer them,
“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

I know it's a bit fanciful, but I like to think that the fact that the disciples weren't always certain that they were, in fact, in Jesus' presence is a hint to us that we can't always be certain that *we're* not in Jesus' presence;

that the stranger on the bus beside us could be Jesus;

or, at the very least, that we should treat that stranger on the bus as if he or she were, in fact, Jesus.

But, as I say those words, I can't help thinking about the carnage that happened last weekend in Nova Scotia;

I can't help thinking about the people who were killed as they were approached by someone they thought they could trust;

someone they thought was an RCMP officer.

And, as I think of the man responsible for the carnage, I can't help wondering what happened to him to make it possible for him to even contemplate such acts, let alone carry them out.

How often was he turned away in his own hour of need and made to feel like an outcast?

I obviously have no idea what this man's life was like, and I can't find it in me to even try to suggest that understanding whatever happened to him could in any way temper the horror of what he did.

I only even mention the events of last week because I feel like I can't ignore them.

I've always tried in my meditations to be grounded in an honest expression of my own struggles and my own sources of inspiration;

to be ready to provide a dose of hard reality even while attempting to find hope in the midst of difficulty.

But if I can believe that we're to see Jesus' face in the face of the stranger beside us, I have to believe that that man also bore God's image in some fashion.

He may have succeeded in warping that image to make it unrecognizable, but the image must have been there at some point, and it frankly makes me wonder if there's a point at which that image can be lost.

I can't really entertain the idea that someone – anyone – can have shed the image of God in them.

I hope none of us is ever so completely bereft of humanity that we can also be bereft of the image of God in us.

But ... I wonder.

I just used the word “bereft”. It's an old word, one that we perhaps don't use very often anymore. It means to be deprived of something, or lacking something.

It's actually an archaic past participle of the word “bereave”. So I suppose if you are bereft of humanity, you are in the process of grieving that loss.

And people in a state of grief can be very lost.

If I can bring you back to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, there are a couple of things that I'd like to note about them.

First off, they were bereft of Jesus. They had lost the one they counted on to lead them, and they were, I suppose, in a state of grief.

They were in that liminal state of disorganization that occurs in the time between losing someone of importance to your life, and coming to terms with that loss.

We don't know why they were going to Emmaus. One assumes they had some business there, or perhaps family.

But, in fact it doesn't really matter why they were going there, because once they met Jesus on the road, and understood who he was, they didn't stay. They immediately returned to Jerusalem.

Whatever plans they may have had;

whatever ambitions they may have had;

whatever pressing business of life may have drawn them to Emmaus, they were unable to continue on the way they'd expected to go.

They *had* to turn back.

They had to adjust to this new reality.

I don't think it's just that they wanted to tell the other disciples what they'd seen.

I think they understood that the world had changed, and they knew they had to be with those most likely to understand the import of their experience.

Their ordinary lives were put on “pause” until such time as they could fully come to terms with what had just happened.

And so, when something like last week's tragedy happens, we do the same.

Our ordinary lives are put on “pause”;

we hold vigils;

We lay flowers and wreathes near the location of the tragedy so that those most affected by the experience will know that they are not alone; they will know that we, too, recognize that the world has changed and that we feel a need to be with those most affected by the change.

I think the tragedy of last week offers a bit more perspective on the inconvenience the COVID-19 restrictions place on most of our lives.

Our lives have not typically been as radically changed as those affected by the loss of life in Nova Scotia, or by the loss of life due to the Coronavirus.

I expect the disciples on the road to Emmaus eventually returned to Emmaus.

But not yet.

Not today.

Today they will remain in Jerusalem with those who most understand the import of what's happened. And they will wait together in social isolation until the coming of the Holy Spirit some weeks away.

At that point their lives will get back to normal on some level. But it will be a new normal, with a new imperative for engaging with the world.

I expect we will also get back to our ordinary lives.

But not yet.

Not today.

Today we will mourn with those who have lost loved ones in Nova Scotia,
and we will mourn with those who have lost loved ones to this virus.

And then tomorrow, or next week, or next month, we will continue the work of helping make this world what it was intended to be.