

3 Easter, Year C
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Some of us find it hard to imagine how we might have responded if we had been present during the extraordinary events of Jesus' ministry. Would I have accepted Jesus' invitation to leave everything and follow him, or would I have walked away sorrowfully as did the rich, young ruler? If I had witnessed miraculous healings and Jesus walking on water, would I have been forever convicted, or just momentarily wowed?

How would I have responded when the soldiers came to arrest Jesus? When the going got tough, would I have run away? And when the women came back and told their story about the empty tomb, would I have believed them or dismissed them?

And if I had been present in that room when the doors were shut and Jesus suddenly just *appeared*, risen from the dead, ... how would I have responded? Then, a week later after Thomas had refused to believe, and Jesus appeared *again*, ... what would I have done?!

It's hard to imagine how *we* might have responded to these extraordinary resurrection appearances, but we know how the disciples responded that day. Peter, the charismatic leader, says, "I'm going fishing." And the other disciples respond by saying, "We'll go with you." It's one of the quirkiest details in the entire Bible. Having experienced the glory of the resurrection, the extraordinary miracle that would change the history of the world, the disciples decide to go fishing.

But what is happening here is something we've all experienced – when we've experienced something extraordinary or been challenged by something we never expected, and we don't know what to do next, we'll often choose to return to what is most familiar to us. Someone who works with wood might return to his shop. A painter might return to her studio. A financial analyst might return to her office and review a client's file.

It's not that we are denying the extraordinary event, but it comforts us to be immersed in what we know when we've been in the presence of something we don't know or understand. And who knows, maybe being back in familiar circumstances helps us psychologically to process something that has stunned or baffled us. Surely this is true for many in the wake of the tragedy at Virginia Tech. We tend to seek solace in the familiar routines of our day to day lives.

Well, the disciples are fishermen. Fishing is what they do for a living and what they know the most about. And this seemingly quirky response to the resurrection appearance of Jesus contains one of the most profound insights of the Gospel. That is, it's in the ordinary circumstances of our lives, it's in the people and places and things we know best that we encounter the divine and the eternal. It's not just here at the altar on Sundays that we meet the Lord; it's at the office of Hutton and Williams and Capital One; it's in the check-out line at Target and Ukrop's; and it's in the people who sit around the supper table with us night after night that the eternal is to be found.

The Lord is waiting for us in all these places, just as he was waiting for the disciples on the beach that day while they fished, while they did what they had done every day. But the disciples are like us, they don't recognize the divine in the ordinary.

More and more I'm convinced that the most important role of sacred services in the church is to sensitize ourselves to the presence of the sacred in our lives. The point of coming here week after week is not simply to fulfill some religious duty, the point is not simply to have an extraordinary encounter with God in church, but to sharpen the faculties of our faith, to train the eyes and ears of our hearts, so that we will recognize the presence of the divine in our ordinary daily lives.

A volunteer who visited Mother Teresa at her convent in Calcutta years ago told about seeing Mother Teresa praying in the convent chapel early in the morning before she began her day's work of caring for the homeless in the streets and soothing the dying who were brought to the convent for the last hours of their lives. This volunteer said that she saw Mother Teresa sitting in silent contemplation before the reserved Sacrament at the altar. Mother Teresa would deliberately place herself before the consecrated bread, the sign of Jesus' bodily presence, and her head would be tipped just slightly to one side.

One day, later in the afternoon, the volunteer said she happened upon Mother Teresa caring for a man who was dying. He was clearly in the last hours of his life; his body was wasted away, and his breathing was labored; and Mother Teresa was comforting him with his head on her shoulder, her own head tipped in exactly the same position as it had been that morning when Mother Teresa was praying before the Sacramental presence of Jesus. Then it dawned on the volunteer that Mother Teresa's life of prayer enabled her to see the presence of Christ not only in the blessed sacrament, but also in the strangers she met throughout the day. Her devotion to Christ in the sacrament of Communion sensitized her to the presence of Christ in the world.

The point is a relatively simple one – that Christ is to be found in the highways and byways of our everyday lives, that the most familiar people, places and things in our lives are imbued with beauty and divinity that are all too easy to miss. The point is a simple one, but the problem is a tough one – how can we cultivate an awareness of the inherent beauty and divinity in our lives, rather than constantly being weighed down by the tedium of the mundane and ordinary, or numbed by the violence and ugliness that shows up all too often in the press?

In this morning's Gospel story, it's only John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, who recognized the Lord. Now no doubt Jesus loved all the disciples, and all the disciples loved Jesus. But it appears that Jesus and John had a special relationship. John, we remember, is the one who was reclining at Jesus' breast at the Last Supper, and it is he who now leans over to tell Peter what no one else can see, "It is the Lord." And with this, Peter, who is a different character study altogether, impetuously springs into the water with his clothes on, because it'll take too long to row back to the shore with the others.

Of course, the other disciples all know that this is just the way Peter is – he gets excited and says and does things quickly at times, without thinking. At the Mountain of Transfiguration, Peter spouts off, “Lord, this is great. Let’s build three booths here – one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” And when Jesus came to them walking on water, Peter was the one who sounded like a child, “Lord, let me walk on the water, too!” And then in his darkest hour, he spoke quickly again in a way he would deeply regret, “I don’t know the man. I don’t know him. I don’t know who he is.”

One thing we might notice in this morning’s depictions of John and Peter is that we’ve seen something like this before. Isn’t this very similar to what we have seen in the story of Jesus’ encounter with Mary and Martha? Mary sits quietly and attentively at Jesus’ feet, while Martha is distracted with her many tasks. Is it any accident that Mary is the first one to recognize Jesus at the empty tomb and that John is the first one to recognize him that day on the Sea of Tiberias?

Surely each of us has a Mary and a John in our lives. Who are these people in your life? Who in your life is apt to interrupt you in the midst of your routine in order to point out how deeply blessed you are and how your everyday life is in fact full of the extraordinary? “Isn’t this a beautiful life? Aren’t these children simply amazing, their gentleness and curiosity and desire to be loved? Isn’t the moon gorgeous tonight, and the evening breeze?” And who is your John, the one who will remind you at the most ordinary of times, “It’s the Lord”? How important it is to have such spiritually mature and perceptive people in our lives.

And surely each of us has a Mary and a John within ourselves. In fact, it could be that one of the most important lessons of the Christian life is that we should learn how to avoid letting the Martha and Peter within each of us overshadow and overrule these quieter and more perceptive voices.

The Martha within myself could easily keep me irritated and distracted with my many important errands and tasks. No, let me be more precise, the Martha within myself DOES OFTEN keep me irritated and distracted with my busy-ness. There is so much to do and so little time. And how often I have felt Peter prodding me from within to speak and act when what was needed most was to remain silent and still! But the truth of the matter is that the world doesn’t much value silence and stillness, and it’s easy for the impetuous Peter to run rough shod over the quieter John in ourselves.

Many of us wonder how we might have responded in various situations with Jesus 2,000 years ago. But the more important question is how we are going to respond in various situations with Jesus today. Because when you go home today, he will be there. When you go to Target or Kroger, he’ll be there. And when you are alone, he will be there, too.

And in every ordinary, routine situation of our life, even when you are with people you don’t particularly like or with people you know so well that you’re absolutely certain Christ could not be at work in them, ... still the voice of the beloved disciple will likely be trying to get our attention; he’ll be saying, “It is the Lord.”