

16. ACT III. JESUS IS ALIVE (John 20:1-29)





‘Father, glorify me
in your own presence’(John 17:5)

In the garden was a new tomb. They laid Jesus there (19:41-42)



Giotto di Bondone, Fresco 1304-1306, Padua, Public Domain, Wikimedia Commons.



John 14:19

‘In a little while the world
will no longer see me,
but you will see me;
because I live,
you also will live.’

Jesus is not saying that they will see him with their physical eyes. He is speaking of a faith-seeing, an enlightenment. The Greek word for 'see' is horao. It has the same root as our English 'aware'. We could translate: 'You will be aware of me.'

In his First Letter speaking of Jesus being revealed, Peter writes: 'Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him, and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the saving of your souls' (1 Peter 1:8-9).

It is the same with touch. We do not touch the Risen Jesus with our hands. We welcome him, we greet him, we embrace him. It is a faith-touching. It is a choice we make to believe: that is to be in love with him and to join him in loving our Father.

John's Gospel witnesses to his belief that Jesus, whose death we have just witnessed, is alive and is continuing his mission in the world through his Spirit through whose action he draws us into the intimate communion of love which he has with his Father.

John uses the word ἐγείρω to carry the weight of the mysterious raising of Jesus, not back to this life, but to a continuance of the eternal life of communion with God that transcends death. Paul stresses the central importance of our belief in the resurrection of the body (σῶμα), he is not suggesting that the risen body is like the body we now experience. He goes on to say: 'You may ask what kind of body to we have in the resurrection'. He goes on to say: 'That is a foolish question.' The best Paul can offer is that it is a 'spiritual body' a σῶμα πνευματικόν (I Corinthians 15:44).

‘Body’ is best translated ‘person.’ We will experience ourselves as filled with the Spirit that unites Jesus and God in a bond of love.

John’s belief in Jesus’ resurrection was based on real experiences. In a series of brilliant portraits, he invites us to open our minds and hearts to the wonder of Jesus’ risen life, while showing us how we might experience for ourselves the reality of Jesus’ presence and action in our midst

‘Jesus promised his disciples: ‘I will reveal myself to those who love me’ (14:21). They will not see him the way they did when he was alive with them before his death, but they will ‘see’ him: ‘You will see me; because I live, you also will live’ (14:19); ‘I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you’ (16:22).

The gospels are meant to be contemplated as one contemplates an icon. This is absolutely imperative for this final section. Jesus has passed through physical death. He is, therefore, beyond the grasp of the senses. His first disciples could not and did not see or hear or touch him in the same way as they had prior to his crucifixion. Yet we have their word for it that they experienced him present among them and we know that this experience affected them profoundly. We know also that many people found their testimony thoroughly convincing. The stunning growth of the Church is evidence of this.

Theirs was a conviction of faith not of sight. This enhances the value of their conviction; it does not diminish it. Believing, as we find it at the heart of Christian experience, is a profound way of seeing, but one enjoyed only by a heart that welcomes the enlightenment of grace.

The encounter is always a surprise, as filled with dread as it is with joy. It is not an experience to which we can cling. Our faith renewed, we are encouraged to walk in the night, knowing that ‘the light shines in the darkness’ (1:5). The ‘Light of the world’ (8:12) is walking with us. Our faith is ‘a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in our hearts’ (2 Peter 1:19).

What makes the experience of the first disciples special and our faith ‘apostolic’ is that they knew Jesus before his death. They could recognise the continuity between their experience of God in Jesus during the time when they knew him prior to his death and their religious experience afterwards.

Scene 1. The empty tomb (John 20:1-10)

Mark 16:1-4

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought **spices**, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back.

John 20:1

‘Early on the first day of the week, while it was **still dark**, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.



John 20:2-4

‘So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple (compare 1:35-42; 18:15-16), the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.



Peter and John Running to the Tomb, Eugene Burnand, 1898, Musee d'Orsay, Paris

John 20:5-10

‘The other disciple bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.’

The Beloved Disciple sees what Peter sees, but for him it is a sign that Jesus is alive. As Jesus promised: ‘I will reveal myself to those who love me’ (14:21). The Beloved Disciple ‘believed’. It is love that reveals to us the implications of what we see.

The story of an empty tomb already contains, for those with faith, a promise and a hope. John's community experienced Jesus, as do we all, as the one who 'is not here' the way he was before his death. They did experience Jesus as with them, as living', as 'risen'. God was faithful to Jesus, and God will be faithful to those who give their lives because of him.



Scene 2. Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene

John 20:11-13 (compare Mark 16:5-8)

‘But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping?’ She said to them, ‘They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.’

John 20:14-16

When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for? Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned and said to him in Hebrew, ‘Rabbouni!’ (‘My Master’).



John 20:17-18

Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, as though I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."

Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him, but found him not; I called him, but he gave no answer. 'I will rise now and go about the city, in the streets and in the squares; I will seek him whom my soul loves.' I sought him, but found him not. The sentinels found me, as they went about in the city. 'Have you seen him whom my soul loves?' Scarcely had I passed them, when I found him whom my soul loves. I held him, and would not let him go' (Song of Solomon 3:1-4).

Gregory the Great c.600

Because of the ardent love of her heart,
Mary continued seeking him when she could not find him,
even after the other disciples had gone away.
In tears she kept searching, and, afire with love, she yearned for him.
Thus it happened that she alone saw him.
She had already sought and found nothing,
but she continued seeking and so found the object of her love.
While she was seeking, her longing grew stronger and stronger,
until it was allayed in the embrace of Him whom she was seeking ...
At first she did not recognise him, but then Jesus said to her: 'Mary' ...
as if to say: 'Now recognise the one who recognises you' ...
Outwardly it was He who was the object of her search,
but inwardly it was He who was teaching her to search for Him.

‘God is silent and hidden so that the heart,
thus pierced and hurt by desire,
may finally open up to him,
with a greater capacity for receiving him.’
(Arminjon *Cantata of Love*, page 251).

‘By delaying the fulfilment of desire, God stretches it;
by making us desire he expands the soul,
and by this expansion he increases its capacity’(Augustine, *On 1 John*).

‘The Bridegroom hides when he is sought,
so that, not finding him,
the Bride may seek him with a renewed ardour;
and the bride is hampered in her search
so that this delay may increase the capacity for God,
and that she may find one day more fully
what she was seeking’(Gregory the Great *Moralia* V,6).



Mary's experience is representative of the many personal encounters which Jesus' disciples, then and since, have had with their risen Lord. Without attempting to define too closely such a profound and necessarily mysterious experience, we can say that John is speaking of a level of awareness open only to one who believes and loves like Mary, whereby we become aware of the presence and action of Jesus in our lives. It is a communion of love that gathers up one's whole being and is experienced as a gift from the one whose presence effects this communion. Mary leads us to the assembled community and it is to the experience of the community that John now turns.

Longing

‘When you search for me, you will find me;
if you seek me with all your heart,
I will let you find me, says Yahweh’ (Jeremiah 29:13).

‘O Lord, all my longing is known to you;
my sighing is not hidden from you’ (Psalm 38:9).

‘As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and behold the face of God?’ (Psalm 42:1-2)

‘My soul yearns for you in the night,
my spirit within me earnestly seeks you’ (Isaiah 26:9).

‘The Spirit and the bride say, “Come.”

Let everyone who hears say, “Come.”

Let everyone who is thirsty come.

Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift ...

The one who testifies to these things says,

“Surely I am coming soon.”

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!’ (Revelation 22:17,20).

Scene 3. Jesus reveals his presence to the gathered disciples

Luke 24:36-40

Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands **and my feet**; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.



John 20:19-21

It was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews. Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side (They are looking on 'the one whom they have pierced' (19:37). The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you.'



John 20:21-22

As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'

Jesus is trusting his disciples to carry on the mission which he has been given him by his Father

John 20:22

**When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them,
'Receive the Holy Spirit.'**

see John 7:37-39

'On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.'

We cannot continue Jesus' mission without his presence, for our mission is to live his life so that others, seeing him in us, will come to see his Father, will believe and so find life (20:31). The scene, therefore, reaches its climax in Jesus' gift of his Spirit.

As God breathed into Adam his Spirit that Adam might live (Genesis 2:7), so now Jesus breathes into his disciples the life-giving Spirit of his communion with his Father in glory. In giving his Spirit, Jesus is giving himself. He is giving us that for which he prayed in the final words of his prayer to his Father in his last will and testament: 'May the love with which you have loved me be in them, and I in them' (17:26). It is the presence of Jesus' Spirit that assures us that we are indeed Jesus' disciples: 'By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit' (1 John 4:13).

John 20:23

If you (disciples, see 20:19) forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.

The Baptist introduced Jesus as ‘the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’ (1:29 & 1John 3:5). John speaks of us being ‘cleansed’ (13:10; and 1John 1:9), and of sin being ‘forgiven’ (20:23; 1John 1:9; 2:12) and ‘destroyed’ (1John 3:8).

Welcoming people into the community of Jesus’ disciples through baptism is one expression of this forgiveness (see Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:16). We are reminded of this in the credal formula: ‘We believe in one baptism for the forgiveness of sin’. Celebrating the Eucharist is another. We are reminded of this in Matthew’s account of Jesus’ words at the last supper: ‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’ (Matthew 26:28).

Over the centuries the Church has developed ritual ways of celebrating the forgiveness offered here by the glorified Jesus, including the sacrament of Reconciliation for the forgiveness of sins committed after baptism.

Just as God's offer of forgiveness is unconditional, so is the forgiveness offered by Jesus through the church. However, just as people are free to reject God's forgiveness and just as a willingness to repent is a necessary condition for forgiveness to be received from God, so is it for the church. Jesus knew who was genuine and who not (2:24-25). The same discernment must be made by his disciples under the guidance of his Spirit.

Scene 4. The Risen Jesus reveals himself to Thomas

John 20:24-25

‘But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord.’ But he said to them, ‘Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.’

John selects Thomas as a symbol of hope for all of us who were not present at the assembly that Easter evening. We have met Thomas twice already. The first time was when Jesus was going up to Bethany having heard that Lazarus was dying (11:16). On that occasion, too, John explained that Thomas was called the twin. The second time was at the last supper when he said to Jesus: ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?’ (14:5).

John 20:26-29

‘A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.’ Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’



Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed and happy are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.’

There is a lot of Thomas in each of us. We hunger for life. We are not content to learn from others or to conform to their pattern of behaviour or their way of understanding and living. We sense that we have a right to experience life for ourselves. We sense that the ultimate journey, the religious journey undertaken in response to a deep call within us all, is a personal journey, shared with others, but involving an invitation, a challenge and a responsibility that no one can take from us or fulfil for us. Jesus assures us that this is right, and he shows us the way: the way of fidelity in loving, the way of compassion.

For that is what God really is like, and we, like Thomas, will come to know that we are in the presence of the sacred when our whole being is moved to love in a creative, compassionate and faithful way. It is a lifelong journey. It is a journey not to be taken alone but in communion with Jesus' disciples. May we dare to undertake it. Then, one day, it will be our turn to say in recognition to him in whom we have believed without seeing: 'My Lord and my God'.

JOHN'S PURPOSE IN WRITING (John 20:30-31)

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.

But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Nathanael: 'You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!'(1:49).

Martha: 'Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God'(11:27).

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life' (John 3:16).

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