

Each year, during the days of Easter week and the two Sundays following, our gospel lectionary readings tell stories of what we call “post-resurrection appearances.” On the Third Sunday of Easter, which is today, the gospel reading associates the post-resurrection appearance with a meal, in one way or another. In today’s reading, Saint Luke also explains the Resurrection as fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. On one level, the gospel writers want to make an association with meals, particularly with breaking bread because of the association with the Eucharist. At another level and in some ways more significantly, the writers want to convince readers of the reality of the Resurrection by showing it as the fulfillment of God’s ancient promise. Only incidentally do our authors inform us of what I think is most significant of all: the faith necessary to believe in the Resurrection derives from the experience of the Resurrected Lord. There can be no belief unless we experience the Risen Jesus in our lives.

I particularly like the reading from last week, the story of “Doubting Thomas.” In that story, nothing is clearer than the role that experience plays in exchanging doubt for faith. Thomas gained resurrection faith only when he experienced the risen Jesus by touching the Lord’s wounded hands and side. The teaching point of the Thomas story, and all of these accounts of post-resurrection appearances, was that Christian faith comes only through one’s experiences of the risen Christ.

Christianity requires a leap of faith. Hopefully, we are all logical and intelligent people that think before we act and certainly before we believe. The truth is that nothing seems more improbable than resurrection from the dead, yet belief in the resurrection is central to Christian understanding. Without resurrection, Christianity is at best a code of ethics, a philosophy that guides our conduct. Without resurrection, we are left hopeless because there is nothing beyond ourselves in which we can find spiritual repose. Without resurrection, there is no hope for our own spiritual immortality in God. Without resurrection, life gives lie to St. Paul’s promise that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God, not even death; because without resurrection, when death does come there is nothing more.

So, how do we make this leap of faith that allows us to believe in the reality of the Risen Lord? The Gospels tell us that faith comes only through experiencing the Risen Lord in our lives. The Church tells us that there are myriad ways in which we can and will experience Jesus. We experience him in by reading the Holy Word, the writings of the New Testament, itself, but only when we allow the Holy Spirit to lead us to understanding. Hopefully, we experience Jesus, at least from time to time, in hearing the Holy Word proclaimed by the preacher. Again, though, that experience is possible only when we let the Holy Spirit do his work and lead us to understanding. When we are open to the Spirit, we experience Jesus in the Eucharist, when we receive the bread and wine and claim it, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to be the Lord’s Body and Blood. And I think that we experience Jesus, perhaps most perfectly of all, in loving our

neighbor, when we let the Holy Spirit work in our lives and enable us to be as Christ to our neighbor.

Jesus once told his disciples that when he was hungry, they fed him. When he was thirsty, they gave him something to drink. Jesus said that when he was naked, they clothed him and when he was sick, they cared for him. When did this happen, Lord, they asked? He told them it happened when they did it for others. Martin Luther, the great German reformer of the sixteenth century, once said that we are called to be a little Christ to our neighbor, in all that we do, in all that we are. Luther hit the nail on the head. This is the Christian mandate: Be Christ to your neighbor! If we do it, we've got it right. When we fail, we make a mockery of our Christian claim.

We are called to live out the Lord's unconditional love by putting selfishness aside in order to nourish others with Christian love. This can be in small things, or large. But living *imago Christi*, living our lives as best we can as icons of the Risen Lord, is really what Christianity is all about. And this is important for us to understand: in this process of living out Jesus by being Jesus to our neighbors, a remarkable and convincing thing happens. We discover that the Risen Christ is within ourselves *and* our neighbor. Christ lives in us and our neighbor, and we experience him by letting him live not just in us but through us and in the relationship we build, in Christ, with our neighbor. We are at our Christian best when we live out our Lord's New Commandment to love others as he loves us.

I think that convincing faith comes incrementally, through on-going experiences of Jesus. Faith will be stronger tomorrow for what we do today. And as we go experientially day to day in living out the Gospel, by being Christ to neighbor, we find that we have made the leap of faith without really being much aware of doubt's chasm, or even our effort at jumping. In almost a surprise, we find that faith and belief have simply happened, and in that faith and belief, we have found God's peace by knowing the Resurrected Christ. *Amen.*