

Glimpses of Easter: The Eucharist as a Visual Gift

Co-Missioners,

For the third week running we send you thoughts from our editor.

Peace and Joy,

The Crossings Community

Glimpses of Easter: The Eucharist as a Visual Gift



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"Now we see in a mirror, dimly..." –1 Cor. 13:12

I saw a flash of Easter last Sunday at the congregation I serve. It had been while since the last glimpse—thirteen weeks, to be precise.

I use "Easter" in the broad sense, as a label for the fresh, enduring, and utterly reconfigured life that, depending on your angle of view, either trickled or exploded into the world with the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. At length it seized us with the holy hooks of Baptism. It drew us in. We hear of it. We trust the reality of it, or struggle to. As we rule we don't see it. "We walk by faith, not sight," as Paul says (2 Cor. 5:7). And again, talking this time not with us but to us, "Your life

is hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:4). So we heard on Easter Sunday this year.

It isn't all we heard, though. There was also this, the verse's coda: "When Christ who is your life is revealed, you also will be revealed with him in glory." In other words, the eyes will kick in. They'll see as the ears hear.

I have always taken this strictly as a promise of things to be. Then came this year's Third Sunday of Easter, with its great text of the trip to Emmaus (Lk. 24:13ff). I poked. I prodded. I read again. I thought some more. Today I argue that Paul's add-on to that Colossians verse applies even now, already now. Christ our life is *being* revealed, not fully, not once and for all, but repeatedly, in fleeting glimpses, each of them a hint of the great unbroken vision to come.

Or put it this way: now we see him. Now we don't. Now we see him again—and again and again in a lifelong string of little flashes. Where? How? In Holy Communion. The Eucharist, rightly celebrated. It's there that "life and immortality," to crib again from the Pauline corpus (2 Tim. 1:10). Or so I submit.

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This revealing communion happened again in my congregation last Sunday. It unfolded very carefully. A sanctuary that seated three hundred and fifty plus before the virus came along was reconfigured for fifty max. Seven foot-spacers kept people at either end of the few pews they could sit in. Traffic in and out was one way. Masks were required at one service, strongly urged at the other. We sank Lutheran hearts by restricting song to a pair of distanced choir members in the balcony. Aside from the Lord's Prayer, congregational speaking was limited to Amens and the occasional one-sentence response. "Glory to you, O Lord." "It is right to give our thanks and praise."

Communion itself was the biggest challenge. I spent a couple of days developing a protocol that aimed to magnify safety without sacrificing dignity and reverence. Away went the common cup. In came the pouring chalice with plastic mini-cups that were *not* tossed in the garbage but set aside for a day when they can be buried somewhere. (Rationale: vessels that have conveyed the

blood of Christ to the mouths of saints require the honor of such treatment, whatever they're made of.) Before setting the table, I donned gloves and a mask. I kept them on through the consecration and distribution. My associate did the same. We went out of our way not to touch people's hands. Not that we had all that many hands to avoid touching. Attendance was low. I wasn't surprised. The people we serve are anything but flippant when it comes to medical advice.

What unfolded even so was another A.D. 2020 version of Emmaus.

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Here's the relevant text: "When [Jesus] was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight" (Lk. 24:30-31).

That Luke is talking here about Eucharistic action becomes plain the moment you glance at his account of the Last Supper. The parallels are thick: "Then [Jesus] took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me'" (22:19).

What then does the Eucharist do for Cleopas and companion, the two at Emmaus? In Luke's words, "It opens their eyes." More specifically, it reveals the honest-to-goodness reality of Easter in the person of Jesus himself. Until that precise moment, new creation has been nothing more than a wondrous idea, an impossible dream, the early morning babbling of some women and, later in the day, the prattle of a stranger they've taken a shine to as they walked and listened. But then he breaks the bread. Voila! Suddenly they see him. Suddenly they don't. A flash of Easter, nothing more, yet more than enough to get them running to Jerusalem and wherever else their joy will carry

them.

Fast forward to the end of Acts 2, where the converts of Pentecost are devoting themselves to “the breaking of bread” (v. 42). What are they seeing? Not Jesus himself as “the first fruits” of Easter (thus Paul, 1 Cor. 15:20, 23), but each other as Easter’s subsequent fruits. Behind them lie the old divisions of natal family, language, custom, and all the other barriers that keep people apart. Suddenly strangers are siblings, created as such by the Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead. This is what the bread-breaking reveals, and with sufficient clarity and force that they behave as siblings (Acts 2:44-45). Years later the Corinthians will choose to ignore what the Eucharist is showing them. Paul famously upbraids them (1 Cor. 11:17ff). They aren’t “discerning the body.” They are eating and drinking “unworthily,” though not, as some of us were led as confirmands to think, by failing to believe hard enough that Christ is really, really, *really* in that bread. Rather, they are failing to do as the Eucharist invites and requires: that they see each other as people the Lord’s body and blood is equally given for, with the same majestic consequences for all. That includes the poor folks squatting in the corner while the others pig out on the potluck. “Stop it!” Paul says. To which he adds the scream of his second letter: “New creation! Look!” But here they aren’t looking. And in dissing the other they are dissing the Lord. Their eyes are missing the real-time gift that Easter is. They are guilty, one might say, of willful blindness.

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It’s been my habit for years to talk about the Eucharist in almost every sermon. Any more I can’t help it. If you want to see what the Gospel is about there’s no better place to look than at this line of people shuffling forward with their hands out to get what God gives in Christ. Cheerfully, he gives it.

Madly, even. Not a one of these people is less or other than a sinner in his or own right. Some may fancy themselves better than others, but God does not. To each and every one he doles out the same death. Then he turns around and hands to each the same pardon, the same promise, the same Spirit, the same body and blood of the same Christ, crucified and raised for them all. He confirms the same Easter life in each of them.

This is new creation on display to cheer our hearts so that we in our joy will run to Jerusalem too, or wherever else the Spirit will blow us.

I wasn't taught as a baptized child to pay attention to this. Communion was served less frequently in those days. This was part of it, perhaps. A greater part, I think, was the straightness of the pews and the drummed-in habit of keeping eyes fixed forward, no looking side to side. This was me-and-my-God time. My invisible God. One took it for granted that all others present were locked in the same one-on-One concentration. "Thou shalt not disturb them." There were private sins to be forgiven, personal faiths to be encouraged, one's own dear Jesus to meet and encounter. "I come, O Savior, to the table / for weak and weary is my soul." Such was the song, no nod given to the indubitable fact that others all around you were singing too.

This started to change in the '60s and '70's for reasons I won't take time to ponder here. Along came architects designing spaces that forced worshipers to notice each other. Liturgists turned the Peace into something to share. Hymnwriters revived the Reformation habit of using plural pronouns. "We-ness" was suddenly the rage, though poorly grasped and under-used, at least by preachers and the people who taught them. I don't recall it getting it much attention in the classes I took, though if the attention-deficit was mine and not the teachers,

that too would not surprise me.

I know only that I had to grapple with New Testament texts as a preacher in my own right before I started to spot what is everywhere to be seen once the penny drops. “We-ness” is of the essence in the apostolic message. They fish with nets, not rod and reel. When, quoting Jesus, they say “You are the salt of the earth,” the “you” is plural. So too when they add, “Let your light so shine.” Cursed be the English that fails to make this plain. There is none of this one-on-one, me-and-my-personal-savior thing in Jesus’ own ministry. Rather, “where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them (Matt. 18:20). And again, “A new commandment I give you (pl.), that you (pl.) love each other as I have loved you (pl.)” (Jn. 13:34).

Paul and Peter give full-throated vent to this in their own letters. God’s project in the crucified and resurrected Christ is as much or more to create a new people as it is to rescue individual sinners. Nor is the individual’s rescue complete until he or she is membered among the people. See 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 2, 1 Peter 2:1-10—and that’s merely for starters.

Easter reality reaches our eyes when this miracle of God’s new people in Christ swims into view; when, for this moment or that, we stand with brothers and sisters—fellow citizens of the household of God—who would otherwise be strangers were it not for the One whose life we share. “This is my body given for you. This is my blood shed for you.” They eat. They drink. We watch it happen. We catch the faith shining in their faces as they return to their seats. And, as Isaiah predicted, we perceive “the new thing” that God is doing, giving drink to “my chosen people, the people I formed for myself to declare my praise” (Is. 43:19-21).

That's what the Eucharist does. It's what the Eucharist is for. That's in part why the private masses of Luther's day were an abomination. Aside from the chattering priest, there was no one to be seen there, no sign whatsoever of the new age unfolding. This is also why I, for one, am less than impressed with this year's "virtual communion" proposals. They don't show us the Easter people either, those strangers transfigured as siblings. Nor, I think, do those drive-through arrangements where all I can see from my car are other cars with their windows rolled up, indistinguishable from the line of cars waiting their turn at the Starbucks window. That's as old-creation as it gets. It isn't Easter. Not visually. I can't imagine that SUV's will be heavily featured when all things are finally new. We'll see lots of people though. Multitudes, even.

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So this was last Sunday's joy where I do my work. For all the fussing with gloves, masks, and the new-fangled chalice, we got that fresh glimpse of Easter and the new age unfolding. So too, perhaps, for those who watched from afar via our livestreaming broadcast; though I can't help but think that for them the glimpsing was a lot fuzzier and less distinct, like that of a neighbor peering through the window of that hut in Emmaus where Jesus briefly sat. Their homebound distance was our loss too, of course. We certainly trusted that others were out there listening, and that God's Easter was alive and well in them, but we didn't get to see it.

I hope this changes soon. God defend us from this wretched virus and bring us all together again.

Jerome Burce

Fairview Park, Ohio

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
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