

ACT III : JESUS IS ALIVE

JOHN 20:1-29

Jesus' death marked for him, as it does for us all, the end of the only kind of existence of which we human beings have direct sensory experience. At the beginning of his letter, John writes: 'We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life'(1John 1:1). Jesus' death put an end to that kind of communication and shared experience. In this sense, Jesus' death is no different from the death all humans undergo: 'I am leaving the world'(16:28). 'You will see me no longer'(16:10).

However, from the beginning of his Gospel John has been sharing with us his conviction that the real life that Jesus lives and that he has come to give to the world is not one which comes to an end with physical death. He has been referring to this life as 'eternal'. It consists in an intimate communion with God that can be experienced in this world but which transcends it. It comes from above to those who are born of the Spirit (3:3-8). This is the life lived 'in the beginning' by the Word (1:1-2), by 'God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart'(1:18). As the Word made flesh it is Jesus' mission from the Father to share this life with all who believe in him (10:10). Like him, we will go through physical death, but, like him, we will not die (6:50; 8:51; 10:28); we will live forever (6:51,58; see our brief summary in the commentary on 11:17-27). When he said to his disciples as his death drew near, 'You will see me no longer', it was not because he would no longer be living. It was because he was 'going to the Father' (16:10,28) to enjoy, as he says in his prayer: 'the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed'(17:5).

The whole of John's Gospel witnesses to his belief that Jesus, whose death we have just witnessed, is now alive and is continuing his mission in the world, no longer through his physical presence which ended with his death, but through his Spirit through whose action he draws us into the intimate communion of love which he has with his Father. As he said at the last supper: 'Because I live, you also will live' (14:19). Sharing Jesus' life we also share his mission: 'I am the vine, you are the branches. If you abide in me and I in you, you bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing'(15:5).

John first mentioned Jesus' post-crucifixion life very early in the Gospel narrative. When the religious authorities challenged Jesus' action in clearing the temple and asked him for a sign, John records Jesus saying: 'Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up'(2:19). The authorities understood Jesus to be speaking of the temple in Jerusalem. John, however, goes on to say that 'he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken'(2:21-22). The word translated 'raised' is the Greek *egeirô* which evokes an image of waking up, stirring, getting moving, showing signs of life. It is what Jesus told the paralysed man to do: '*Stir yourself, take your mat and walk*'(5:8). John uses the same verb to describe Mary's getting up, to hurry to see Jesus (11:29), Jesus' getting up from table (13:4), and his instruction to his disciples: '*Rise, let us be on our way*'(14:31).

By analogy, John uses *egeirô* also to describe what happened to Lazarus (12:1,9,17) when Jesus raised him from the ‘sleep’ of death (11:11-13) back to this life by a miraculous resuscitation (Greek: *exhynizô*, 11:11). And so, again by analogy, he uses this simple word *egeirô* to carry the weight of the mysterious raising of Jesus, not back to this life, but to the eternal life of communion with God that transcends death. When Jesus spoke of raising the temple in three days, ‘he was speaking of the temple of his body’ (2:21). Note that the text does not say that Jesus was talking about raising his ‘soul’ (Greek: *psychê*). He was talking about his *body* (Greek: *sôma*), the totality of his human reality. Here as in every case throughout the New Testament the word ‘raised’ in reference to someone who has died relates to the whole person. Jesus promised that he would raise us, too, beyond death, to this same eternal life (see John 5:21).

That this is not to be understood in a crass physical sense is obvious from Paul’s discussion of the matter in the fifteenth chapter of First Corinthians. He sums up the difference between the body which we experience before death (‘what is sown’) and the body which we experience after being raised from death: ‘What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body’ (1 Corinthians 15:22-24). In other words, by the power of the Spirit, we, in all that makes us human, are transformed after our death to be with Jesus in the glory of his Father.

John’s belief that Jesus was raised to life after his death is a belief shared by all the writers of the New Testament. Peter’s preaching as recorded by Luke in his Acts is perhaps our earliest witness to this. Addressing the Jewish crowd on the day of Pentecost, he says: ‘You crucified and killed Jesus of Nazareth by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death’ (Acts 2:23-24). For ‘raised up’ Luke uses here the Greek *anhistêmi* which occurs as an alternative to *egeirô* in John (see 6:39,40,44,54; 11:23,24) and throughout the New Testament. Cognate with it is the noun *anastasis*, translated ‘resurrection’ (John 5:29; 11:24,25). Peter returns to the same theme in later speeches: ‘You crucified Jesus Christ of Nazareth whom God raised (*egeirô*) from the dead’ (Acts 4:10). ‘The God of our ancestors raised up (*egeirô*) Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree’ (Acts 5:30).

However, Peter is not content simply to speak of Jesus being killed and being raised by God. He speaks of Jesus appearing to certain disciples and of his instructing them to carry on his mission. In his sermon at the house of Cornelius he declares:

We are witnesses to all that Jesus did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

– Acts 10:39-43

Along with the other writers of the New Testament, John is not content simply to tell us that Jesus is alive (14:19) or to share with us his belief that Jesus has been raised from the dead. He tells us that the tomb in which Jesus was laid was found to be empty and he narrates some of Jesus' appearances. John's belief in Jesus' resurrection was not based on hope or on wishful thinking. It was based on real experiences. As we shall see shortly, he wants to share something of the experiences which he and others had of the risen Jesus. 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.

At the last supper Jesus said that he would be leaving the world and going to the Father, and so his disciples would no longer see him. Yet he also says: '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 in another sense they will 'see' him: 'You will see me; because I live, you also will live' (14:19); 'A little while and you will no longer see me, and again a little while and you will see me' (16:16); 'I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you' (16:22).

As we saw when commenting on these statements, they can be understood at a number of levels. At one level Jesus may be referring to 'the last day', what is sometimes referred to as the *parousia*, the final revelation of the presence of the Lord. At another level, he may be referring to the moment when each disciple will follow Jesus through death. But from the material which we are about to study and from the witness of the rest of the New Testament, we can conclude that he may also be referring to those special experiences, called 'seeing' by analogy, in which Jesus, after his death, revealed himself to those who loved him as alive and as active among them.

Paul too speaks not only of Jesus dying and rising, but also of his being buried (with a focus on the tomb), and of his appearing to certain of his followers:

'I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

– 1Corinthians 15:1-8

As we have often indicated, 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.

However, as the following scenes will demonstrate, theirs was a conviction of faith not of sight. This enhances the value of their conviction; it does not diminish it. As Saint Augustine never tired of repeating: ‘Seek not to understand so that you may believe, but believe so that you may understand’ (Tractate on John 29.6.2). 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.

It is true that the heart, like the eye, can be deceived. The faith of which John is speaking, however, had to stand the acid tests of ordinary life. It was a faith that refused to shy away from the real. It was a faith that bore fruit in love. It was a faith that commanded the respect of anyone willing to witness it with an open mind. It stood up to the most rigorous human testing, and its fruit was human beings of a maturity that was stunning by any standard that people might reasonably have set. It has continued to be such down through the centuries.

The word ‘see’ and its passive form ‘was seen’ (or ‘appeared’) keep recurring in the following scenes. It is important to remember that while the word ‘see’ (Greek: *horaô*) is commonly used for the sensation of seeing with the eyes, it is also used for a wide range of experiences that can be called ‘seeing’ by analogy. The Baptist declares that he has ‘seen’ that Jesus is the Son of God’ (1:34) – a faith-perception of a man enlightened by grace. A little later, Jesus promised: ‘You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man’ (1:51) – an experience, certainly; an enlightenment; an awareness of faith; but outside the realm of optical vision. When Jesus warns those who fail to believe in him that they will not ‘see’ life (3:36), we could properly translate ‘experience’, and at a profound level at that. When Jesus claims to have seen the Father (6:46), and that in seeing Jesus the disciples are also ‘seeing’ the Father (14:7,9), we are not to understand this in terms of physical sight (see also 8:38).

What can we say about the post-crucifixion experiences which the disciples had of Jesus? There is an etymological connection between the Greek *horaô* and our English ‘aware’. This provides a clue. Without claiming to be able to define too closely these profound and necessarily mysterious experiences, we can be confident that John is speaking of a level of awareness open only to one who believes and loves: ‘I will reveal myself to those who love me’ (14:21). Only the believer and the lover can be aware of the presence and action of Jesus in his or her life. The awareness is such that it leaves no doubt. The recipient finds it totally convincing, but also profoundly converting. It is a communion of love that gathers up one’s whole being and is experienced as a gift from the one whose presence brings about this communion.

The risen Christ is not limited in how he chooses to reveal himself, but if we are to experience his presence, we must be open, as John will soon make clear, to seek him with all our heart. Experiencing him will especially happen as we gather with our fellow believers and celebrate his life and death. In the following portraits, John wants to show us that the risen Jesus is encountered precisely where we need him and in ways which we least expect.

The risen Jesus

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' (2Peter 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. We who live in a different period cannot share their pre-crucifixion experience, but our post-crucifixion experience is essentially the same. We have their word for it that the one who touches our lives and sustains us in our journey of faith is indeed Jesus of Nazareth living in communion with his Father, and inviting us to that same transforming union.

Act III Scene 1. The empty tomb

When we compare this account with the other Gospels, it would appear that very early on Sunday morning some women came to the tomb. They were surprised to find the tomb empty and ran back to tell the others. This is recounted in different ways in Matthew 28:1-10, Mark 16:1-8 and Luke 24:1-12. Some of the men then came to the tomb and they too found it empty. This is recorded in Luke 24:12,24.

John has simplified the first account by focusing solely on Mary Magdalene, and he enlarges the second account because of the importance of the Beloved Disciple in the tradition from which his Gospel comes.

The scene takes place early in the morning after the Sabbath which that year was the feast of the Passover. John notes that it is still dark, a symbolic reference to the fact that there has as yet been no indication that Jesus, the light of the world (1:4; 8:12; 9:5), has emerged from the darkness of the tomb. Mary Magdalene, already mentioned as having been with Jesus' mother and other women near the cross (19:25), comes, presumably with other women (see the 'we' of 20:2), to perform the customary wailing, but finds that the stone had been removed from the entrance to the cave in which Jesus' body had been lain. She does not realise that death itself has been defeated but presumes that someone has removed Jesus' body. She runs back to tell the others what has happened to 'the Lord'.

¹Early 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.

²So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, 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.'

³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb.

⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.

⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in.

⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.

⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed;

⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.

¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.

John wishes to focus on Simon Peter, the leader of the Twelve (compare Luke 24:12,24), and on 'the other disciple', identified as 'the one whom Jesus loved', within whose community this Gospel was composed. He has been mentioned in the account of the last supper (13:23-26) and also as being with Jesus' mother on Calvary (19:26-27). The identification of the Beloved Disciple with 'the other disciple' here, encourages us to think that he may well be the unnamed disciple who first met Jesus with Simon Peter's brother, Andrew (1:35-42), and who came with Simon Peter to the high priest's house where Jesus was being interrogated (18:15-16).

This beloved disciple reaches the tomb ahead of Peter. The tomb is open as the women had said, and he can see that the body of Jesus is missing. He sees the cloths in which the body had been wrapped (see 19:40). He waits to allow Peter to enter first. Peter enters the tomb, sees the linen wrappings and notes that the cloth which was used to cover the head was lying in a separate place.

Mary had thought that someone had taken Jesus' body away. The presence and careful placing of the cloths argue against such an explanation. When Lazarus was brought back to this life by Jesus he was still wrapped in the burial cloths. He was not freed from the need to die again. This is not the case with Jesus. John makes a special point of mentioning the cloth that was used to cover Jesus' face. We can expect to see the face of Jesus unveiled and 'the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2Corinthians 4:6). The other Gospels are making the same point when they describe the tearing of the temple veil at Jesus' death.

Simon Peter is moved to wonder but he does not yet suspect that Jesus has risen. Then the Beloved Disciple enters the tomb. He 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.

Peter was left wondering and the Beloved Disciple needed to see what he saw to come to belief because, as John says, ‘as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead’. This is just one more example of how understanding of the Scriptures and of Jesus’ fulfilment of them had to await Jesus’ glorification (see 2:22; 12:16).

By ‘scripture’ John is speaking of the whole thrust of God’s revelation as found in the sacred writings. When the early Christians looked back at their sacred writings in the light of their experience of Jesus’ death and resurrection, they came to see that Jesus’ suffering and God’s fidelity to Jesus in raising him to life fitted into a pattern that could be found in the inspired poetry of the Bible. In relation to the resurrection, we may point to the following texts: ‘My servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up’ (Isaiah 52:13); ‘I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out himself to death’ (Isaiah 53:12). We could also think of the words of the Psalmist: ‘You do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit’ (Psalm 16:10) or of the prophet Hosea: ‘After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him’ (Hosea 6:2). No tomb could hold Jesus. Death could not conquer him who is the resurrection and the life (11:25). Darkness could not blot out him who is the light of the world (1:5; 9:5).

The empty tomb is a statement that the resurrected life is not simply a new beginning. All that Jesus was is caught up in the transforming mystery of grace. The episode of finding the tomb empty as narrated here by John depicts for us the wonderful truth that death is robbed of its prey, that the whole of our human person will be transformed and that the final victory is not with darkness but with light. On the cross Jesus radiantly reveals the beauty of God as a God of unconditional love. The empty tomb is a sign, for those with faith to see, that Jesus’ trust in his Father was not misplaced.

The experience of an empty tomb already contains, for those with faith, a promise and a hope. John’s church experienced Jesus, as do we all, as the one who left the world and went to the Father (16:28). They had to wait on God. But they had reason to wait, for Jesus was ‘living’ (14:19); he was ‘risen’. God was faithful to Jesus, and God will be faithful to those who give their lives in following him (12:25-26).

Though the Beloved Disciple believed when he entered the empty tomb (20:8), he does not present the empty tomb as a proof of the resurrection: Mary thinks that someone has taken the body away and the disciples did not understand. The empty tomb does, however, raise a question. It is a reminder of what Jesus himself hoped for, and it prepares the disciples, and it can prepare us, to be vigilant, so that when the risen Jesus comes to us we will be open to his presence and his call. If, like the Beloved Disciple, we learn to love, love will enable us to see him when he comes. The experience of Mary Magdalene recounted in the following scene is chosen by John to demonstrate this.

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb.

As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and 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.

¹³They 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.’

¹⁴When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

¹⁵Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? Whom 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.’

Act III Scene 2. The risen Jesus reveals himself to Mary Magdalene

Let us begin our commentary with an excerpt from a sermon preached on the feast of Saint Mary Magdalene c.600AD by Pope Saint Gregory the Great. He picks up the essential point of John’s narrative, namely that love can transform even the sadness of an empty tomb into a place of revelation and communion. Mary is, indeed, a ‘beloved disciple’, and so she learns to believe (see 20:8). Her deep longing is a response to the even greater longing that burns in the heart of the one she loves:

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.

The empty tomb is, for Mary, the site of revelation, portrayed here in the traditional biblical way through the presence of divine messengers. There are two of them, for two witnesses are needed for evidence to stand (Deuteronomy 19:15). They do not provide any answers, but they do give rise to a question: ‘Why are you weeping?’ Her reply is simple and direct. She is a symbol of all who seek Jesus but do not find him. When she gives expression to her longing he comes to her. She does not recognise him, for the risen Jesus is not going to be recognised with the eye. He can be recognised only by a heart enlightened by faith. We find this same truth being conveyed in different ways by all the Gospel writers (see Mark 16:12; Matthew 28:17; Luke 24:37 and John 21:12).

Mary recognises Jesus when he calls her by her name. As Jesus said earlier: the sheep know the voice of their shepherd (10:4). We might recall the words of God spoken through Isaiah: ‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name, you are mine’ (Isaiah 43:1). At the supper Jesus said: ‘I am going to him who sent me ... Because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts’ (16:5-6). He added: ‘You will weep and mourn but your pain will turn into joy’ (16:20). When Mary hears him call her by name her sorrow is turned into joy and she tries to hold him.

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

Jesus tells her not to try to hold on to him. God’s graces are always to be received with open hands. It may seem to her that he is back with her the way he was before. But she must know that he is going to the Father. As he said at the last supper: ‘If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father’ (14:28). ‘Sorrow has filled your hearts. Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you’ (16:6-7). There is no need for Mary to try to hold on to Jesus. Through the gift of the Spirit he will take her to himself (14:3) and abide in her (14:17,23).

Jesus has been ‘lifted up’ and so he draws Mary to himself (12:32). We have seen Jesus being ‘lifted up’ on the cross. We are now seeing him ‘lifted up’ in being raised from the dead. John reminds us of the goal of this being ‘lifted up’: it is his ascension, his going up to the Father (13:1; 14:12,28; 16:10,28) who sent him (7:33; 16:5).

¹⁶Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’

She turned and said to him in Hebrew, ‘Rabbouni!’ (which means Teacher).

¹⁷Jesus said to her, ‘Do not hold on to me, because [‘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.”

¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

His glorification is completed now that, in God's presence, he enjoys 'the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed'(17:5; see 6:62). Now that he is glorified he can send the Spirit (7:39). Mary is not to cling to moments of revelation and recognition, however sublime. She is to share her experience with the others and together they are to await the gift that he has promised.

Jesus' commitment to his disciples is complete. He pledges his love in words that recall those of Ruth to Naomi: 'Your people shall be my people, and your God my God'(Ruth 1:16). We are Jesus' brothers and sisters. He is 'the first-born within a large family'(Romans 8:29). 'Through him we have access in one Spirit to the Father' (Ephesians 2:18). There are echoes here of the traditional covenant formula: 'I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people'(Leviticus 26:12; see Exodus 6:7; Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:28).

Mary Magdalene tells the disciples: 'I have seen the Lord'(20:8). Our mind goes back to Psalm 22, a favourite psalm for Jesus' disciples in their reflecting upon his passion. The psalmist prays to be delivered from his suffering and makes the following promise: 'I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you'(Psalm 22:22). Overjoyed at her encounter with the risen Jesus, Mary proclaims his name ('the Lord') to the assembled congregation. John is presenting her to us as an example. Luke does much the same in his narrative of the two disciples who encountered the risen Jesus on their journey to Emmaus and in the breaking of bread. Any experience we have of the risen Jesus is a gift of love for us; but it is more. As Paul says to the community in Corinth: 'To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good'(1Corinthians 12:7). We are to take our experience back to the community. Only in union with the body of Jesus' disciples can we safely discern what is happening in our lives, and it is only when we are joined to the body that grace can bear its full fruit. We are all part of the one vine (15:1-5).

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.

Act III Scene 3. The risen Jesus reveals himself to the assembled disciples

Here we find John's account of the climax of Jesus' glorification. Jesus has been lifted up on the cross. He has been raised from the tomb. He has ascended to his Father. Now, in the evening of *that* day, he comes to his disciples as he had promised (14:18,28) to reveal himself to them and to give himself to them through the gift of his Spirit. Baptised in the Spirit they are enabled to live Jesus' life of intimacy with the Father, and they are enabled to carry on his mission in the world, attracting others to believe and so releasing them from sin to live 'close to the Father's heart'(1:18). Luke has given us his own version of this scene (Luke 24:36-49), as has the author of the Appendix to Mark's Gospel (Mark 16:14-18).

John has consciously given his narrative a liturgical setting by repeating that it was 'the first day of the week' (see 20:1). It was on the first day of the week that the Christian community gathered to celebrate in the community Eucharist the beginning of the new creation initiated by Jesus' resurrection (Acts 20:7; 1Corinthians 16:2). This is 'the Lord's day'(Revelation 1:10).

The Appendix to Mark focuses on the Eleven (that is, on the Twelve minus Judas, Mark 16:14). Luke has the same focus, though he speaks also of their companions (Luke 24:33). While John acknowledges the special importance of the Twelve (6:13, 6:67-71; 20:24), in this scene he speaks more generally of 'the disciples'. What he has to say here applies to all Jesus' disciples, then and since.

The disciples are living in a state of 'fear of the Jews'(see 7:13; 19:38). Jesus had warned them: 'If they persecuted me they will persecute you'(15:20). Is this their fear, or are they afraid that they will be blamed for the disappearance of Jesus' body (compare Matthew 28:13)? In any case there is no indication that they are expecting a resurrection. We might note that John does not want us to think of these post-crucifixion scenes in temporal sequence. The faith of the Beloved Disciple (20:8) and of Mary Magdalene (20:16) play no part in this scene.

¹⁹When 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

^{19b}Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'

²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side.

Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

²¹Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'

²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'

These are the first words of the risen Christ to his disciples (compare Luke 24:36). We remember the words he spoke at the last supper: 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid'(14:27). This is the peace made possible, as Saint Paul tells us, 'through the blood of Jesus' cross' (Colossians 1:20). The peace enjoyed by Jesus did not prevent him suffering, nor will it protect his disciples from pain. It is a peace that flows from a profound and intimate communion with God and it enables us not to be locked in the suffering. Jesus shows them the nail wounds in his hands (in both Hebrew and Greek 'hand' can include the lower arm and so is consistent with Jesus' wrists having been nailed, compare Luke 24:40), and the wound in his side (19:34). They are looking on 'the one whom they have pierced'(19:37), and they see that he is alive and has come to them as he promised.

The gift of Jesus' peace overflows in that special joy that comes only with communion with Jesus. This is the joy he had promised: 'You have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you'(16:22). He had said: 'If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father'(14:28). Their hearts are, indeed, filled with joy, for the one they love has risen from the tomb and is now living in the glory of his Father. They are seeing the Lord as he had promised they would (14:19).

As in the other Gospel accounts, John records Jesus commissioning his disciples to carry on the mission which he has been given him by his Father (compare Luke 24:47, Mark's Appendix 16:15-18, and, in a different setting, Matthew 28:18-20). This is an expression of Jesus' love, and his words echo the assurance which he gave at the last supper: 'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you'(15:9). We recall also Jesus' prayer: 'As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world'(17:18).

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. John has been preparing us for this gift from the beginning of the Gospel. When the Baptist introduced Jesus as 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (1:29), he went on to testify that he had seen the Spirit descend upon Jesus and remain upon him and that God had revealed to him that Jesus would 'baptise with the Holy Spirit'(1:33). The gift of wine at Cana (2:9) and the 'spring of water gushing up to eternal life' of which Jesus speaks to the Samaritan woman (4:14), are in different ways symbolic of the gift of the Spirit. Jesus told Nicodemus that he would need to be born of the Spirit (3:5-6), a gift which Jesus would give 'without measure'(3:34).

At the festival of Booths we learned that Jesus could give this gift only when he had been glorified: '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'(7:37-39). At the last supper, when 'the hour had come for him to go to the Father'(13:1), Jesus promised his disciples to give them his Spirit 'to be with you forever'(14:16). The Spirit would make it possible for them to carry on their mission (15:26-27; 16:8-11). Our expectation of the imminent fulfilment of this promise was heightened by what happened when Jesus' side was pierced (19:34-35) as well as by the words spoken by the risen Jesus to Mary Magdalene (20:17-18).

Luke chooses to dramatise Jesus' ascension at the conclusion of his post-crucifixion apparition narratives (a process echoed in John in the scene with Mary Magdalene). In his Gospel Luke portrays the ascension as the conclusion of the day of resurrection (Luke 24:51). In his Acts he portrays the ascension as the conclusion of 'forty days' during which Jesus appeared to his disciples (Acts 1:3). His gift of the Spirit from the glory of heaven is portrayed dramatically in his Pentecost narrative (Acts 2:1-4): 'Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear'(Acts 3:32-33). Likewise, though in a different way, John brings his narrative of Jesus' glorification to a conclusion with the gift of the promised Holy Spirit.

Just 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'(1John 4:13).

²³If you 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). Besides speaking of sin being 'taken away'(also 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). He chooses to highlight this as he concludes his Gospel.

God's offer of forgiveness is unconditional. Our receiving of it, however, is not. John has insisted that people divide themselves according to their response to Jesus: 'God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God' (3:17-18; see also 9:39-41). Those who reject the word of Jesus' disciples are rejecting Jesus' word. They will 'die in their sin'(8:21). Those who open their hearts to their word, believe in Jesus and come out into the light 'will have life'. Their sins will be forgiven (compare Luke 24:47).

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).

As noted in commenting upon 1:29, sin is incompatible with living Jesus' life. However, disciples of Jesus do sin:

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

– 1John 1:8-10

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 and when it is made under the guidance of his Spirit he promises to honour it: 'If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained'(compare Matthew 18:18).

Jesus is telling us that when we forgive he forgives. Without implying a limit to divine forgiveness, we could perhaps also say that when we hold back forgiveness, we can be holding people bound in their sin. Our mission is to carry on his mission of forgiveness, as he reminds us in the simple words of his own prayer: 'Father, forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us'(Luke 11:4). Paul reminds us: 'In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us'(2Corinthians 5:19).

Notice that at the conclusion of the scene John does not speak of Jesus leaving. He remains with us through his Spirit. We might compare the last words of Matthew's Gospel: 'I am with you always, to the end of the age'(Matthew 28:20).

In the equivalent scene in Luke Jesus' appearance is greeted with fear and doubt (Luke 24:37-38). In the Appendix to Mark, Jesus upbraids his disciples for their lack of faith (Mark 16:14). We find a similar expression of doubt in Matthew (Matthew 28:17). This element is lacking in the scene we have just examined. John wants to investigate the phenomenon of doubt more closely. He does so in the following scene in which he shows how Jesus brings Thomas, one of the Twelve, from doubt to the fullness of faith.

²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So 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.'

²⁶A 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.'

²⁷Then 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.'

²⁸Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!'

²⁹Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

Act III Scene 4. The risen Jesus reveals himself to Thomas

When the disciples experienced the risen Jesus they were in a position to recognise him because they had seen him and heard him and lived with him in the years leading up to the crucifixion. They knew him and they knew what it was like to be loved by him, forgiven by him and commissioned by him. They were able to recognise the mysterious faith-awareness that they had after Jesus' resurrection as an experience of Jesus whom they knew so well. They had seen Jesus and they had learned to believe.

John now turns his attention to those for whom Jesus prayed at the last supper: those who did not know him prior to his death but who 'will believe in me through their word' (17:20). How are we to know that our religious experiences are experiences of communion with Jesus? How can we who have not seen learn to 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 'Didymus' ('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).

When the other disciples tell Thomas that they have seen the Lord, he demands to see Jesus for himself. We are reminded of Jesus' words: 'Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe' (4:48).

On one level John is concerned to show how imperfect Thomas's reaction is: he refuses to believe on the word of the others, and he demands to experience something tangible or he will not believe. On a deeper level, however, we see that Jesus does not reject him. Jesus knows his heart and understands his imperfect response. After all, Thomas knows Jesus. He knows that if Jesus is truly alive, he will surely manifest himself to him personally and not be content to inform him through others. He is right. That is what Jesus does.

In the previous scene John mentioned that the doors were ‘closed for fear of the Jews’ (20:19). If this scene were meant to be understood as occurring later in time we would expect the doors to be open, for Jesus has already given his disciples his Spirit, his peace and his joy. In fact the doors are closed, for John’s scenes are not sequential. He is taking us back to the assembly to examine the element of doubt that would have been part of the reaction of Jesus’ disciples. The first thing to note is that the closed doors of our fears are no barrier for Jesus. He knows his sheep (10:14): ‘he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust’ (Psalm 103:14). John repeats Jesus’ greeting (see 20:19) and his showing his hands and side (see 20:20). In the previous scene, he focused on joy. Here he focuses on lack of belief.

He takes Thomas’s words to a new level and invites him to believe. In an earlier scene, Thomas had asked to know the way (14:5). Here he is shown it. It is important to observe that John intentionally does not say that Thomas physically touched Jesus. We are being invited to touch him in another way, through being involved in practical love with the wounded ones of this world. As the Son of Man, Jesus has identified with them. Their wounds are his wounds (compare Acts 9:4-5). John is telling us that we come to faith in the risen Jesus through compassionate love. It is not enough that we should look upon the one whom we have pierced (19:38). We must also touch his wounds and probe his pierced heart – wounded and pierced in the broken ones for whom Jesus gave his life. It is also important that we maintain communion with the assembled community of believers. It is at a Eucharist that Thomas comes to believe.

Jesus’ love, demonstrated by his wounds and his faithfulness to Thomas, brings Thomas to the faith-conviction that Jesus truly is one with the Father and has come from God and has returned to God (13:3). He accepts Jesus as God’s Word, the Word who is God (1:1). Jesus has come to Thomas and taken him to himself (14:3). He had said: ‘When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realise that I am’ (8:28). Jesus has now been glorified and Thomas believes that he truly is ‘I am’ (‘the Lord’). Jesus had promised: ‘On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you’ (14:20). Thomas not only acknowledges his faith in the divinity of the glorified Jesus, he acknowledges the life that Jesus is giving him as he addresses Jesus as ‘*My Lord and my God*’ (compare Psalm 35:23; Revelation 4:11). One who failed to believe has come to faith and accepted Jesus as the fulfilment of the covenant promised by God: ‘I will say to Not-my people, “You are my people”; and he shall say, “You are my God”’ (Hosea 2:25).

Thomas and his contemporaries are indeed happy, for they have been blessed to see Jesus and to come to believe in him: ‘Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear’ (Matthew 13:16; Luke 10:23). What about John’s community? What about all those who never had the opportunity to see Jesus in the flesh? Perhaps Peter puts it best: ‘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 salvation of your souls’ (1Peter 1:8-9).

My Lord and my God

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'.