

The 501st Time

Text: I Corinthians 15: 1-11

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*I want
to see Jesus,
maybe in the clouds.*

*Or on the shore,
just walking,
beautiful man*

*and clearly
someone else
besides.*

*On the hard days
I ask myself
if I ever will.*

*Also there are times
my body whispers to me
that I have.*

Mary Oliver¹

Last week, I told you that Easter is a dawning thing. Surely you recall! Please tell me you do.

I reminded us all that Easter is something that takes time to sink in, time to absorb, time to rise to full consciousness, time to flourish, to mature, to blossom. It's not the kind of things that happens all at once or in ways always visible. This is simply the truth of the Living Spirit of Jesus.

Add this curious seeking detail. We know that across all measures the institution of the church is suffering significant decline. Yet, at the self-same time, the percentage of Americans reporting that they have had a personal mystical experience of the presence of God is on an equally dramatic rise. In fact, the most current data indicates that more than half of us bear witness to having had such experiences!² This is a huge culture shift, a narrative shift, telling us that while the forms and formats of religion are changing, the Living Spirit of Jesus is alive and well!

This week, my curiosity about this got the best of me. I ran the hunch that the same living mystical experiences that we are hearing so much about today were very much a part of the picture on and around the first Easter. So, I set off on a Biblical treasure hunt tracing through stories and images, faces and places, wondering about those who were there back

then and where it was that they discovered the Risen Christ. I was enticed and delighted in what came clear.

Here's one: conjure the aroma of the seashore in the very early light of day.

You know what a sensory banquet that can be! Lapping water, moist air, gulls out diving for breakfast, the scent of the tide as the small waves curl as the wind dries seaweed along wet edges of sand.

So, just imagine this. Hardly a day had passed since Jesus defied the tomb. The disciples were fishing along the Sea of Galilee. Just how they traversed that distance so quickly, and all together, is a bit unclear. After all, it's a stretch of nearly ninety miles!

Even more perplexing, though, is why they went back to work so quickly with all that had come to pass. I suppose that when the bottom falls out of life, a good many of us just try to get back to what's comfortable ó you know, to get our minds in another place.

But, there Jesus was, just after daybreak, standing on the shore, speaking across the tides, asking them how the catch was going. He was calling to them and, dawning thing of dawning thing, all of life was transported to a new day, abundant and eternal. It was as palpable and vivid as the morning air!

Or very different. Imagine the dry taste of the dusty path that led to Emmaus. Hot, sweaty, long and lonely. And still in the midst of grief. Good thing to have a friend to share that seven-mile journey. Certainly, there was chatter side-by-side between those two disciple companions, but I can imagine a good bit of awkward and confused silence, too.

But then, oddly, almost as if beamed into the moment, someone joins with them, mysteriously generic enough to seem unremarkable. He asked them of things and listened and engaged them and drew them out. He seemed strangely familiar, even if unknown.

Still, it wasn't until later, once they had arrived at nightfall, once they had quenched their thirst, once that stranger had broken the bread— only then did they realize it was Jesus. And then, get this: it was as if scales fell from their eyes and opened to new light, and they recognized him— and then he disappeared! Dawning thing of dawning thing!

An intriguing detail makes this appearance even more powerful. Scholars say they don't really know where the famously noted Emmaus Road was! By count, there are four different guesstimates as to its precise location! This has led the more creative of such minds to say: "This is a good thing. It means the Emmaus Road could be anywhere!"³

One more mystical face and place and time looks like this. As the days passed after Easter, there was a great stirring, a life-giving energy, a generative force that seemed vividly present ó like a fresh spring breeze after a long winter. It was happening from Tiberias to Jerusalem and everywhere in between, a windy hope that could best be described as organic.

It is as if experience of the Living Spirit of Jesus was spreading like wildfire. One particular report of this just astounds me. Our witness writes: "He appeared to Peter and then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than 500 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, he appeared to me." Just imagine that! More than 500 times!

So, let's imagine the 501st time as a metaphoric invitation to each of us today. Let's be attentive in new ways to the holy presence of God in our lives. Let's open ourselves to the assurance that the Living Spirit of Jesus is never far, always near – even when we do not know. And let's continue to live with hearts that burn with resurrection power: for truly, as I have told you, surely you remember: Easter is still a dawning thing!

My family and my friends, the Easter table is set and ready for all of us. Amen.

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¹ Mary Oliver. Thirst: Poems by Mary Oliver. Beacon Press, 2006, pp. 24-25.

² Diana Butler Bass. Christianity After Religion. HarperOne, 2012, p.1-37.

³ Marcus Borg and N.T. Wright. The Meaning of Jesus. HarperSanFrancisco, 1999, p. 132-5.

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