

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Strange Meeting

One of the most disconcerting factors in the stories of the Resurrection is the constant theme of *uncertainty* in the people who meet the risen Christ. They recognize him, but with hesitation. One can suggest reasons for this, but are they the true ones?

It Can't Be....

The obvious reason is that you can't believe your eyes when you meet someone you know to be dead; you go back over the reasons why you thought he *was* dead, and this unusual process is bound to produce a somewhat glazed look on the face. That, of course, may be the whole extent of the matter; I'm not so sure. It hardly explains the Gospel today, where two people, for whom Jesus had embodied high hopes, go for a seven-mile walk with him without realizing who he is. Luke is firm but not explanatory: *something prevented them from recognizing him*. Hm.

Their Eyes Were Opened

Whatever it was then ceases to disable them, and they know him; and they immediately exclaim: *Did not our hearts burn within us, as he spoke to us on the road and opened the Scripture to us?* They talk like people who have awoken after the same dream, or two people who have listened in silence to a concert, and now want to say the effect it had on both of them. Somehow it is their *common response* that is important, as if the opening of their eyes depended on what they had shared in listening to their unrecognized companion.

The Unexpected Guest

There are other startling realities connected with this man who comes back from the dead, all connected with the *unexpectedness* of his arrival: for instance, his capacity to arrive inside a locked room. The tomb, as described in Matthew's Gospel, is still closed, guarded and sealed as the three women arrive: when the stone is rolled away, it is not so that the Lord may come out of his tomb: it is so that the tomb may be disclosed as already empty. It seems that the risen Christ has power over space and matter, and this enables him to "appear" and "disappear" in a way which leaves no room for debate: something unique is clearly happening. Now, to our rational sensibilities this can only appear as a kind of magic - the sort of thing we are shown on television, and know is a

clever illusion. It never makes us better able to live in the world, or more ready to believe in one another - quite the reverse, in fact, because we know we've been the victim of deception. We must not surround the Resurrection stories with this kind of suspicion. The Gospel is telling us that Jesus' risen life is freed from earthly limitations.

In Alia Effigie

When Caravaggio painted his wonderful picture of Christ and the two disciples at table, he wanted to catch the exact moment of disclosure - the breaking of the bread. He painted Jesus quite differently from the traditional portrait, and was taken to task to explain his beardlessness, the fact that the landlord in the shadows had not removed his hat in the presence of the risen Lord, and also the fact that the fruits on the table were out of season for Passover. He explained that in the Latin version of Mark reference is made to Jesus' appearance *under another form* ('*in alia effigie*'); and he had therefore painted him beardless to express this fact (and the innkeeper had been taken in too!). The unseasonal fruit was to express the messianic banquet. I'm sure that one truth about these stories is that the risen Christ comes in ways which permit us to miss him: one thinks of the Christ who comes in the poor, hungry, imprisoned, etcetera; one remembers the sacramental presence of Jesus, and the Jesus who comes in the Church. How many who pride themselves on helping the hungry and poor ("I like to think that's *real* Christianity") completely fail to recognize Jesus in his Church, teaching, gathering, forgiving, healing, in fact doing all that he used to do before he unfortunately got himself crucified? The moment of disclosure - the moment where we receive our *reason* for being Christian, is the breaking of the bread - which demands the Church. Knowing the resurrection is possible only for those who are "called to share his supper". Anyone, therefore, who offers to find the risen Lord outside his Church is missing the point, and is also likely to be greatly disappointed!

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