



Texts in Context

Encountering the Risen Lord: Reading the Easter Gospels

SHAUNA K. HANNAN

When read in its entirety, the Easter season lectionary lays out a template for what could be an absorbing David Lynch film. We begin with the end before continuing in the middle only to conclude with what is yet to come. First, we hear about the events immediately following Christ's resurrection, and then we experience flashbacks to the foreshadowing of the resurrection. At the same time, alongside the storyline from the Gospel according to John are snippets from the Acts of the Apostles which contain scenes from the future.

Preaching in such an order can be as confusing as the Midwestern aphorism, "Now, then," which, oddly enough, is used to imply that we should move ahead. However, rather than bemoan its lack of sequential purity, we may perceive in the Easter season lectionary an opportunity to talk about the sometimes surreal and confusing elements of an encounter with the risen Lord and the impact those encounters have.

In my work in the admissions office of Luther Seminary, I have regular opportunities to hear about encounters with the risen Lord from people who are beginning to articulate their vocation to public ministry. This is no straightforward matter either. Many call stories include variations of the following statements: "This cannot be happening to me since recently I have not even understood where or who Jesus is." "How will I know if it is truly God calling me to do this?" "I couldn't possibly do that!" "This call makes sense only now that I have begun to look back at how God has been calling me all along. How did I miss it before now?" Although lack of clarity is a common feature in the discernment process, most peo-

The Gospel readings for the Easter season provide an opportunity to talk about the surreal and confusing elements of an encounter with the risen Lord.

ple are convinced that it is some sort of encounter with God that has led them to their present circumstance.

Yet aside from Saul's scaly transition to becoming Paul in Acts 9, the Easter season lectionary does not provide us with conventional call narratives (e.g., Moses, Samuel, Jonah, and Mary). So, what could these texts possibly have to say to the folks I meet trying to discern their calls to ministry? Further, what might they mean to those of us already serving in some form of public ministry and caught up in that ongoing state of discernment as to what God may be calling us toward next? Finally, what might these passages mean to our congregants, people also listening for God's voice and hungering for an encounter with the divine?

In a word: plenty! For starters, like our Easter lectionary readings, discerning God's voice and call does not always progress in a neat and prescribed order. One day a person may be certain that she recognizes a strong call and the next have a sense that God is not present at all. Some of the best news to such a person is that she is not alone in what seems to be a profoundly capricious journey.

To get at more of what these passages offer, let's begin near the end of the story (which, of course, is just the beginning) and consider three dimensions of our encounter with the risen Lord: losing, recognizing, and following the Lord.

LOSING (SIGHT OF) JESUS

Early 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. So 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." (John 20:1-2)

Where did he go? Once again, the proverbial *they* enters the situation. *They* have taken "my Jesus" away. Jesus is not in the tomb where he is supposed to be. Repeat: Jesus is not where he is *supposed to be*. Have you ever heard that? Have you ever said that? Take comfort, this is a regular motif in the gospel accounts of Jesus.

Mary and Joseph discovered this when Jesus was only twelve years old (Luke 2:41-52). The young Jesus was supposed to be walking right by their sides, or at least within the group of travelers leaving Jerusalem after the festival of the Passover. Instead—as his parents discovered after three days of frantic searching—Jesus stayed behind in the temple conversing with the teachers. When rebuked by his mother for causing such alarm, Jesus calmly replies, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" Similarly, some years later, Martha and Mary, sisters to the recently deceased Lazarus, complain, "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died" (John 11:21, 32). Once again, Jesus is not where he was supposed to be, and once again Jesus' reply seems to call the questioner into question: "Your brother will rise again" (11:23). And now we have Mary weeping and asking help from the man she (mistakenly) supposes to be the gardener, because Jesus is not in the tomb where he is supposed to be.

Admittedly, there is some selfish kind of comfort that comes with knowing that we are not the first to have the experience of losing sight of Jesus. Discovering that *they* have taken away “our Jesus” is cause for alarm indeed. But we may also learn from the manner in which others have responded in such situations. Like Mary, when we are unsure of God’s presence in our lives, it is worth inviting others into that struggle, as by doing so we may reencounter Jesus and discover anew that grief will not be the end of the story. Like Jesus’ parents, we too may ask of Jesus, “Why have you treated us like this? We have been searching for you in great anxiety,” only to discover that he will always be where he most needs to be. And like Martha and Mary, we may want to reprimand Jesus at times—“If you had been here, this tragedy might not have happened!”—only to discover that, with Jesus, new life is still possible.

Although losing sight of Jesus is not a prerequisite for an encounter with him, it is a common, albeit confusing, reality. Should this surprise us? As we continue to move forward into the season, which is backward in the story, we see Jesus warning us of his forthcoming absence:

Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, “Where I am going, you cannot come.” (John 13:33)
I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. 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. You heard me say to you, “I am going away, and I am coming to you.” If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe. (John 14:25–29)

Throughout John’s Gospel (e.g., John 1:38; 18:4; 20:15) Jesus asks, “Whom do you seek?” If the Gospel mirrors our lives at all, is it any wonder that we fear not being able to find Jesus? Like the disciples, all too often we seek to pin Jesus down to where we feel he is supposed to be, only to awaken eventually to the reality that he has been present all along, although often where we least expect him—and most need him—to be.

RECOGNIZING JESUS

Mary mistakes Jesus for the gardener. Thomas wants proof. Seminarians want to know if it is truly God calling them to public ministry. Pastors want to know if their current call is what God is asking of them. Parishioners want to know if this job, this situation, this relationship, is what God intends. In short, most of us want to know how we recognize (most literally, “know again”) Jesus. Each of the Easter readings offers us insight into such discernment through specific Easter affirmations.

The Resurrection of Our Lord: Easter Day (John 20:1–18)

Jesus calls Mary by name, and she can’t help but respond. Amid her confusion,

grief, and doubt, Mary hears herself addressed by name and in that naming recognizes her Lord. More than that, Mary finds the courage to “let go” of her Lord in order to be his messenger. Interestingly, without Mary even having to voice her desire to cling to him, Jesus says to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father.” Then, Jesus tells her to go and tell the others. She goes, forsaking the comfort of his physical presence to bear witness to his resurrection. When do we want to hold on to Jesus, staying in that “mountaintop” moment? Just as we heard on Transfiguration Sunday, we are reminded in the Easter season that we must come down from the mountain, for there is work to be done in the valley. Go and tell: the Lord has called us by name and sent us out with a mission.

Second Sunday of Easter (John 20:19–31)

Jesus comes to us even when we huddle in hiding behind closed doors. Thankfully not even our greatest fears can stop Jesus from breaking into our lives. The disciples discover this as Jesus appears in the locked room and shows them his wounds. It is only then that they truly recognize Jesus. But Thomas, who was not privy to that experience, is not quick to believe simply on the basis of hearing about his fellow disciples’ experience. He wants proof and, ultimately, gets what he wants. But we are the “those” about whom Jesus speaks when he says, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Are the stories of other people’s encounters with the risen Lord enough for us to believe? Or do we, like Thomas, demand proof? As the last verses of the Fourth Gospel betray, John’s deep hope is that the “signs” that are written “in this book” are indeed enough. In fact, this passage pushes us to ask what signs in the Gospel (or elsewhere) convince us to believe, to follow Jesus, and to begin and continue in our current vocations, trusting that Jesus will use these words to break through our closed doors and hearts to speak to us.

Third Sunday of Easter (John 21:1–19)

Jesus keeps appearing in our lives. Today’s reading portrays Jesus’ third cameo after his resurrection, and the disciples are still hard pressed to recognize him! Perhaps this time it is because they do not expect him to be participating in their ordinary lives. (“If Jesus is Lord, why is he bothering with fishing?”) Do you recognize Jesus in your daily routines? Where do you expect Jesus to be? Where do you not expect Jesus to be?

One of the most peculiar lines in this Gospel reading is verse 12: “Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ because they knew it was the Lord.” It is true that sometimes we fully recognize the presence of the risen Lord in our lives, but for one reason or another we do not want to acknowledge it. What are some of those reasons? Do we, like Peter who hides his nakedness by jumping into the water upon hearing that Jesus is present, have something to hide from the Lord? Or perhaps it is the cost of discipleship, which Peter discovers later. (As the parallel readings from Acts testify, responding to Jesus’ call to follow is no effortless

matter.) Whatever the reason, we can be sure that Jesus will not give up on us, but will keep coming after us until we recognize and respond to our Lord.

Fourth Sunday of Easter (John 10:22–30)

Jesus calls out to us in order to lead us forward. “My sheep hear my voice,” Jesus says. In an echo of the Easter Day reading portraying Mary’s encounter with the risen Christ, we find Jesus again promising to call us by name: “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.” We cannot proclaim that enough! In the face of Jesus’ earlier words (“But you do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep”)—not to mention those life experiences that cause us to doubt whether we belong to God—it is important to call us back to our baptism, where God promised to adopt, love, commission, and send us forth as God’s own children.

Fifth Sunday of Easter (John 13:31–35)

We will know Jesus by loving one another as Jesus loves us. Recall the camp song, “Oh, they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love. Yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.” That song just does not go deep enough, does it? In this Sunday’s Gospel we find out that when we love one another we not only discover something about our neighbor, but we actually find out something about Jesus. The new commandment is that we love others in a way that Jesus loves: unconditionally, surprisingly, fully, and eternally. We can do this only as we hear of Jesus’ love poured out for us and all the world.

Sixth Sunday of Easter (John 14:23–29)

Jesus does not promise an absence of struggle, but rather promises to be with us in tumultuous times. Let’s face it, when our hearts are aching over Jesus’ supposed absence it is impossible to convince ourselves to be calm. (Try to convince a two-year-old that “mommy will be right back.”) But here is where it is important to recall Jesus’ words, “And now I have told you this *before it occurs*, so that when it does occur, you may believe.” Knowing that struggle, pain, even the fear of abandonment are simply part of life in this world, Jesus forewarns his disciples—and us!—of his impending absence and gives us comforting words, “Peace I leave with you.” Because Jesus tells of his departure and the sending of the Holy Spirit in the same breath, we can be assured that God does not skip a beat in helping us recognize God when things around us change.

Seventh Sunday of Easter (John 17:20–26)

Jesus will support us in our search for him. The last Sunday before Pentecost concludes with a glimpse into the future. We are invited into a most intimate setting, in fact, holy ground: Jesus is communicating with his Father. In this space we recognize Jesus as one who prays not only for his first disciples but for all who will come to believe through them—that is, for you and me! Given what we have already heard about Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, it should be no surprise that

Jesus truly cares deeply for God's people and for the coming of God's kingdom. This week, we hear that compassion affirmed in the promise that, well before we began seeking Jesus, Jesus was seeking out all of us latter-day believers, praying for us that our faith may be sparked by hearing the testimony of his first followers.

FOLLOWING JESUS

Having lost and found Jesus—or, perhaps better, having felt lost and now found by Jesus—we may come to a certain conclusion: though we may weave in and out of a sense of being in the presence of the risen Lord, once Jesus has grabbed hold of us, we can no longer be bystanders. The Easter season draws us into God's action in the world. The disciples try to lock themselves away but Jesus appears and sends them out. They cannot even get by with avoiding conversation about Jesus' true identity. Mary Magdalene does not get the opportunity to hold onto Jesus for herself. She is sent to go and tell. The whole book of Acts, in fact, describes the developing and world-changing conviction of the early followers of Christ that they are those whom God has called and commissioned to bear witness to God's abundant grace.

Encounters with the risen Lord, as surreal and confusing as they, at times, may be, provide new life-giving opportunities to believe in and follow God.

LOOKING BACK (OR IS IT FORWARD?)

When prospective students visit our seminary, current students say to them, "You will get really good at telling your call story." Upon seeing the confusion in the prospective students' faces, they proceed to tell them not to worry: such articulation comes with looking back as they move forward in the process. While doing just that with John's Gospel throughout Easter, consider calling forth the stories that come out of the lives of the people with whom you minister. How do you as a messenger of God's word in this Easter season engage others and their call stories, their encounters with the risen Lord? Who in your congregation, after witnessing God's great work in the world, has simply gone home and said nothing for fear it may change them? Who continues to weep over Good Friday's events and needs special attention to be reminded of the promises of resurrection? Who is doubtful and needs proof? Who is confused about what may have been a recent encounter with the risen Lord? Who has a new understanding of following Jesus? Who has perceived Jesus and longs to tell others? While not everyone has a call to public ministry, God calls each one of us to be someone and to do something in light of God's saving activity in Christ. Perhaps this is a good time to say, "This Easter season you will become really good at telling your call story." Such an adventure will provide a perfect lead-in to the Day of Pentecost, when the church is inaugurated anew in its mission and we celebrate the gift and direction of the Holy Spirit. ⊕

SHAUNA K. HANNAN is associate director of admissions at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota.