

# *The Resurrection of Christ and the Creation of Community*

Mary Hinkle Shore

Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, Hickory, North Carolina

Eight days into my new job as a seminary administrator, I joined the other six people who hold a similar office in my denomination and a few bishops for the continuation of work the others had started a few months earlier. We gathered to explore how our institutions—and our church body as a whole—could better represent the diversity present in the geography we inhabit. As a denomination, we are older and we include more Caucasian members and native speakers of English than the neighborhoods that surround our churches. In Revelation 7, all nations and tribes and peoples are praising the Lamb. In anticipation of the Last Day's activities, might we Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Lutherans get a more robust start on embodying that beloved community and its praise? How could our seminaries and our bishops who are themselves part of underrepresented communities lead toward that goal? That was the topic of our meeting.

At intervals in the two-day conversation, one of my colleagues kept saying, "I don't want us to 'Easter over' the difficulties here." I think she meant something like, "I don't want us to minimize—to paper over—how hard this work will be by using the religious jargon of new life." She was reminding us that "Christ is risen!" is not a slogan for avoiding the spiritual practices of confession, repentance, imagining something new, and taking risks to get there.

I was sympathetic to my colleague's concern, but I remember thinking, "Wouldn't a little 'Eastering' actually help here?" The testimony that Christ is risen *should* be brought into conversation with a problem as vexing as how we embody Christian fellowship beyond our understandings of tribe. In this essay, I seek to do that. First, I notice three features in the testimony of the gospels to the resurrection: 1) the risen Jesus appears in mostly mundane surroundings and stays with his puzzled followers as they take in the news of his new life, 2) his suffering and his victory remain intertwined after he is risen, and 3) when he appears, he draws the attention of his conversation partners beyond him and beyond themselves to others. After exploring these three features of the resurrection stories, I offer preliminary comments on their implications for the Spirit's work of gathering and sanctifying the church in our own time and place as a community across differences.

## *Life-Sized and Local*

In the resurrection, Jesus' destinations and audiences are small-scale. This is like him, of course. Except for the last day or two when he was dragged before a governor and king (cf. Matthew 10:18), nearly all of Jesus' ministry was spent with people whose lives played out in apparently inconsequential places and events. On the other side of the cross and resurrection, readers of the gospels might expect a higher level of interaction with the powerful, yet the evangelists tell a different story. For the risen Lord, there is no first century equivalent of a parade through Manhattan, a trip

to Disney World, or a photo opportunity at the White House.

Mary Magdalene, lingering in the garden after Peter and the Beloved Disciple have returned home, fails to recognize Jesus for far longer than readers are sure it would have taken us.<sup>1</sup> Finally, Jesus speaks Mary's name, and she knows him. His sheep hear his voice, and one sheep at a time, Jesus begins to reconstitute the flock. In Luke, Jesus walks along a stretch of country road with a couple of disciples while "their eyes were kept from recognizing him." Jesus uses the time well. He teaches the others from the Scriptures about the necessity of his suffering. When the time comes for the travelers to part ways, the two invite Jesus to stay with them. He agrees. At the table, as the guest takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them, they see him. They recognize him in actions they have likely seen him do dozens of times, most recently at the last supper he shared with them.

Jesus enters a room where some of his followers have locked themselves away. Having missed the experience of seeing Jesus alive, Thomas refuses to take his friends' report at face value. He knows that Jesus died, and he knows how. Like the seminary president who does not want her colleagues in church leadership to "Easter over" the hard stuff, Thomas says as clearly as possible that he is unconvinced. "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" (John 20:25). Several days later, Jesus arrives again in the upper room and invites Thomas to touch his wounds and believe. Again, another witness to the resurrection gets particular help recognizing Jesus and coming to trust in him.

In the resurrection, Jesus also returns to the backwater where he lived and worked. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, women at the tomb are directed to tell his disciples that Jesus is on his way to Galilee. We have two accounts of Jesus appearing in Galilee. In John 21, Jesus interacts with some fishermen, turned disciples, turned fisherman who have been skunked through the night. They eventually do catch some fish and catch on to who is addressing them, and they join Jesus on the beach for a meal and more teaching.

In Matthew 28:16-20, Jesus meets his disciples on a mountaintop. They offer him a combination of worship and doubt, and true to form, he pledges to keep working with them. He describes his authority to them, gives them further work to do, and he promises to be with them "to the close of the age."

The apostle Paul knows a tradition that the risen Jesus appeared "to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time" (1 Cor 15:6), but the gospel writers include no such large-scale appearances. In the gospels, the risen Jesus appears in out-of-the-way places to one person at a time or to very small groups. Even though he is supposed to be ascending to the Father (cf. John 20:17), Jesus keeps appearing, first in Jerusalem, then Emmaus, then back to Jerusalem, then in Galilee. He takes the time that his friends need to be able to trust that he is alive and that his life makes a difference for their lives and those of others.

### *Wounded Lord<sup>2</sup>*

Luke and John offer resurrection stories in which the suffering of Christ is a primary concern. Luke tells the story of Cleopas and a companion walking to Emmaus and "talking with each other about all these things that had happened" (Luke 24:14). Jesus, unrecognized, inserts himself into their conversation and brings it to

a standstill. The verbs for discussing and talking in Luke 24:15 and 17 have a lot of energy connected to them. The New English Translation gets at this sense of a lively, maybe even loud, conversation by using the English words *debating* and *discussing so intently*. Yet when Cleopas and his companion are faced with getting the stranger up to speed, they stall out. “They stood still, looking sad” (24:17).

Where does one start? For someone to understand the loss they have experienced, one would have to understand the past they experienced. There is so much to explain. When Cleopas speaks again, one can hear the sense of frustration he feels. Is this stranger on the road the only person in Jerusalem not to know what happened? They tell the story of their hopes and the hopelessness they are feeling now. They also relate the testimony of some women among them, who say the tomb is empty. The two on the road are amazed and puzzled by the testimony of the women, which is not to say that they believe it, just that they do not know what to do with it.

After all this, it is their new companion’s turn to talk. He asks, “Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” To explain the necessity, Jesus walks the two back through Moses and the prophets.

Luke says nothing here about the specific texts the risen Jesus might have found to explain the necessity of his suffering. In Acts 8, the Ethiopian eunuch happens to be reading a Suffering Servant passage from Isaiah 53 when Philip happens to be found alongside his chariot. The two talk, and “starting with this scripture, [Philip] proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus” (Acts 8:35). Perhaps Jesus interpreted Isaiah 53 for Cleopas and his companion? For what it is worth, however, the Isaiah 53 reading has more to do with the fact of suffering than the necessity for it.

To explain the *necessity* of suffering, one might look back at Luke 4 for the Scripture Jesus reads aloud in the synagogue at Nazareth and interprets at the start of his ministry. Borrowing from Moses and the prophets, Jesus combines a text from Leviticus with a quotation from Isaiah to describe his work:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. (Luke 4:18-19)

What Jesus needed to do—the necessity laid upon him that he would not abandon—was to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. That fiery Pentecost Spirit that would be poured out on the disciples a few weeks after Easter was upon him. The Spirit of the Lord made it necessary for Jesus to free the oppressed. He needed to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, that jubilee when slaves go free and debts are forgiven and even the land gets a break from non-stop production. Jesus needed to love the way God loves. Loving the way God loves necessarily meets with resistance (and leads to suffering) because the world is so thoroughly organized around opposing values.

In Luke, the risen Jesus spends time working through the “why” of suffering with his disciples. In John, the risen Jesus displays the marks of suffering to them. In

John's gospel (and only John's gospel), Jesus says, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (14:9) and "the Father and I are one" (10:30). He says, "Very truly I tell you, before Abraham was, 'I am'" (8:58). Jesus identifies with God so completely and in ways that are so much more explicit than in the other gospels that many readers think believers from a later generation put these words in his mouth.

This gospel, known for its elevated picture of Christ, is the one in which Thomas says, "I want to see the wounds." He is steadfast in his unbelieving and clear about the conditions under which that might change. Thomas could have put any condition at all on his believing, and the condition he chooses is seeing and touching the marks of crucifixion on the body of the Lord. A week later, Jesus appears. He offers Thomas physical evidence of his crucified and risen life as well as a window on the character of his lordship: "Put your finger here," Jesus says, "and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Robert Smith concludes, "When the Fourth Gospel declares the oneness of Father and Son, it is proclaiming that the wounds of Jesus are integral to the identity of the mystery we call 'God.' What the pages of this gospel proclaim is not so much that 'Jesus is like God' but rather, 'God is like this Jesus with his wounds.'"<sup>3</sup>

### *Expanding Circles of Communion*

No contact with the risen Jesus has as its goal communion only with the people to whom he has made himself known. The circle always expands. Each scene includes an event or directive that propels the participants to engage people outside the scene. Appearances consistently move those to whom they are given beyond themselves. Jesus meets women at the tomb and directs them to the disciples where he also appears. Jesus meets the disciples and directs them to all people where, it follows, he will also appear. Jesus does not understand the beloved community to be defined by its current boundaries.

We often worry that references to making disciples of all nations, or witnessing to the ends of the earth, or to forgiving the sins of any are inhospitable starting places for engaging those of other faiths or no faith. Indeed, throughout history, Christians have often misused these commands toward imperialistic ends. Yet that is not the only way they function. We could hear them instead as the risen Jesus saying, "Don't make the mistake of walling yourselves off and withholding the life you have in me from others. The risen life you see that I have—indeed, the risen life you also now have in me—is always for others too, just as the life I have with the Father and the Spirit has always also been for you."

### *The Community of the Resurrection*

It would surprise everyone who is not a bishop in my denomination to hear how our bishops routinely talk of being powerless. "We really have no constitutional authority at the churchwide level." Or, "Given our church's congregational structure, bishops can do very little but practice the art of persuasion." Hidden behind these statements is frustration at bureaucracy. Perhaps the statement also betrays envy at the perceived power of others (Methodist bishops? Catholic bishops?) who themselves probably talk about their powerlessness vis-à-vis the systems of which they are a part! Also hidden here is a powerful sense of disappointment that can morph into an excuse not

to hope. Human beings have a powerful capacity to look into an empty tomb and see nothing of significance.

Bishops do this. So do seminary administrators, seminary faculty, senior pastors, associate pastors, church councils, and church staff. Middle-class Americans look at a political process fueled by huge amounts of money and conclude we cannot change anything. “Go big or go home” comes to mean “Go home and binge-watch Netflix.”

The stories of the resurrection encourage us instead to regard ourselves as worthy of the company of the risen Lord and to get ourselves to Galilee. Jesus appears to the littlest of little people: he appears to women whose closest companions do not even take them seriously when they report the resurrection (cf. Luke 24:11). He appears to a couple of grieving, hopeless travelers on the road to Emmaus, to followers cowering behind locked doors, and to someone who remains steadfast in his unbelief. Nothing in these stories suggests that you or I have to be more important or powerful than we are to witness and bear witness to the resurrection. In fact, the less “at the center” we are, the more chance we may have for such witness. Jesus directs his disciples to Galilee. That is, he directs them to their home, to a place that is unimportant to all except those who live there.

As seminary leaders and bishops, we have a responsibility to ask how our church structures are working against the fullest expression of the beloved community here and now. Yet we cannot somehow attend to structural work without ever having an actual life-sized, local relationship with someone different from us. No one can. Years ago, I complained to a therapist that I was lonely, and he replied, “You must get out of your house.” (Oh, wow! Why hadn’t I thought of that?) I was willing to do anything except put myself in the path of other people. To our fears of difference as we work to create community across difference, Jesus says, “I am going ahead of you to your neighborhood. I know the place looks inconsequential, maybe even hopelessly so. I know you think you’re powerless over most everything. Even so, that’s where I’ll be: ahead of you, in your neighborhood.” Once in our neighborhood, we may hear him say something like, “Children, you don’t have any fish, do you?” (cf. John 21:5).

On Easter Sunday we sing “The strife is o’er, the battle done,” testifying to the risen Christ’s reality and our destination. Still the Risen One rises with wounds. “To believe in this, Jesus means to take him, wounds and all, into our own lives. To believe means to participate in Christ’s own suffering on behalf of the true life of the world.”<sup>4</sup>

White people working on race relations in America often sound to others as if we are asking, “Can’t we just let bygones be bygones?” White seminary leaders working on reshaping a largely white denomination sometimes act as if activism can fix this. We will reconfigure our boards, rewrite our workplace policies, update our curriculum and reading lists. Congregations can put “All are welcome!” on their sign. Churchwide executives can write statements on diversity that churchwide assemblies can endorse. We know how to do these things. Diabolically, we know how to do these things and have them result in *no changes* to the demographics of our denomination!

Given that white activism has had limited success decentering white folks, might we instead cultivate the curiosity and courage to notice the wounds of our siblings in Christ? We could start by listening, looking, and not looking away when we are

invited to “put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side” (John 20:27). Suffering love is the truth and beauty of God and Christ. Suffering love is at the center of our mystical union with the Divine and each other. Curiosity and courage aren’t everything we will need. Wounds aren’t all we will be called to witness. Still, with Thomas, we could start there.

Testimony to the resurrection of Christ is persistently local, characterized as much by scar tissue as more conventional signs of victory, and always drawing its witnesses into expanding circles of communion. The new life Christ has and shares with his followers propels those who experience it to share it more widely. The women tell the disciples. The disciples tell Thomas (with no luck). Jesus circles back to include Thomas. Jesus appears to those on the road to Emmaus. In response, they run back to Jerusalem to report it, only to have those they have run to blurt out before they can speak: “The Lord has appeared to Simon!” And then Jesus appears again!

There is a certain level of chaos here. An always expanding abundance of life gets messy. Categories of “us” and “others” are being redefined so often that they eventually cease to be meaningful—not because we are “all the same,” but because who “we” are is always coming to include others, and still others, and again more others. This is the risen life of Christ and the destination of witnesses to the resurrection. We will live in something of a mess. We shall also be numbered among “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!’” (Rev. 7:9-10). Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

#### Notes

1 Paul Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Nashville: John Knox Press, 1985), 105.

2 I have borrowed the title of this section from Robert H. Smith, *Wounded Lord: Reading John through the Eyes of Thomas* (Eugene Oregon: Cascade Books, 2009), ed. Donna Duensing.

3 Smith, *Wounded Lord*, p. 6.

4 Smith, *Wounded Lord*, 6.