

## Opening the door to Christ in the stranger's guise

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The story of the road to Emmaus is a much beloved account of the revelation of the crucified and risen Christ to two downcast disciples, who were walking along in the shadow of the cross, full of despair and loss of hope. The story is made up of five movements. Firstly there is the journey towards Emmaus by the two, probably a husband and wife, who are talking together of their predicament as followers of a lost cause. Their inspirational leader and messiah has been hunted down, tortured and killed. The messianic dream has been shattered and their future is full of dread and emptiness. Then secondly there is the mysterious stranger who joins them on the road, who joins in the conversation, shifting its ground and pointing to the seeds of hope. Thirdly there is the invitation to the stranger to linger and join them in a meal, an invitation to open the door to him. "He walked as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying "stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is nearly over" So he went and stayed with them." (Luke 24: 29-29)

Fourthly, there is the meal where they break bread, and the revelation as the bread is broken that the crucified and risen Christ is the mysterious stranger in their midst, and then fifthly he vanishes from their sight and they reflect on the way in which their hearts were burning within them while he was talking within them on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to them about how the messiah must suffer and die and enter into his glory. The shadow of the cross would be illuminated by the light of the resurrection.

A number of commentators have noted that the turning point in this story is not where you might at first think it was. It isn't the arrival of Christ on the road, or the revelation of the breaking of the bread, but rather it is the opening of the door by the two disciples to the stranger, which means that their hearts are open enough to offer hospitality, **to open a door**, which then makes possible the bread breaking which then issues in a revelation of the real presence. It is the opening of a door by the disciples which makes possible the miracle of Christ risen presence. This Emmaus bread-breaking and beautiful communion would not have happened if the open door had not been offered. Let me share a story which sums up this truth in our lives in a very powerful and memorable way. Perhaps you can identify with it as religious, since it is about the religious life in mission, under the shadow of the cross and in the light of the resurrection.

From the first millennium of the Christian era, there is recounted the story of a young monk who had come to a monastery on the edge of a desert in his late teens, with the passionate hope that, by living the life of a brother he might be granted an experience of the risen Christ; like Mary Magdalene, like Thomas and the other disciples. He believed that the lifestyle of the brothers and their vocation in serving the risen Christ would increase his chances of being granted a living encounter with Jesus. Surely if he lived like those early disciples, the risen Christ would come to him, greet him and embrace him? He adopted the apostolic lifestyle of the brothers of poverty, chastity and obedience. During his first ten years in the monastery, he experienced the deep peace that prayer can bring, the brotherly love that the community of brothers offered and the meaning of servant ministry to the poor, which was the mission of the monastery itself. However he was not granted an experience of the risen Christ as it is found in the resurrection appearances of the Gospels.

After ten years of ministry as a brother, he was asked to pick up the responsibilities of the brother at the monastery gate. This ministry involved supporting and responding to those people who gathered at the gate at noon every day. In the centuries before a welfare state emerged, it was often the

monasteries and convents who offered solidarity, hospitality and advocacy to people in the greatest need and to those who had been marginalised by society and by life.

For another ten years, this brother ministered to those who sought the shelter and care of the monastery. A bell would be rung at 11.30am, to signal that preparations needed to be made to meet those who would gather at the gate at noon and then several hours of ministry would follow. During all of these years, the brother was never granted the encounter he longed for. Although he believed in what he was doing, he never achieved the spiritual goal of his life.

One day, at about 11.20am, the brother was kneeling at his prayer desk in his cell. Quite unexpectedly and quite gently, it seemed to him that his cell began to fill with light. The sensation grew and he began to discern a presence in him and around him, full of grace and peace. He realised he was about to be embraced by the risen Christ and every fibre of his being was warmed and quickened. And then the bell went at 11.30am. This felt like a gross violation of his once in a lifetime sacred experience; it seemed so wrong and so badly timed. He wrestled with his conscience; should he stay or should he go? But all those years in the monastery got the better of him and he thought "Someone might freeze tonight if I don't go, perhaps a child might starve if I don't go, perhaps someone will give up in despair if I don't go." So he left the cell and the beginning of the spiritual experience of a lifetime and trudged reluctantly to the gate. He was weeping and he felt cheated in a way. Nothing spectacular happened at the gate, in contrast to the cell. Some of the same people were there, with many of the same needs.

After the usual two hours at the gate, he returned to his cell, deflated and weary of soul. He knelt down at his prayer desk, feeling defeated and empty... and then he discovered that the sense of light and presence was still there, except now it was stronger than it was before. The sense grew until it overwhelmed him with presence and love. He heard a voice deep inside his soul say, "If you had not have gone, I would not have stayed." He opened a door and Christ walked in.

That story is told to witness to the truth of our relationship to the risen Christ. He comes when we are not expecting him, he comes when we need him the most and he comes in the midst of our lives with all their blood, sweat and tears. But above all, this story tells us, as it told the brother, that Christ is always present, unseen, behind the events of ordinary life and ordinary days and ordinary events. This is usually not an obvious or spectacular encounter, but witnesses to the truth that Christ taught, "*If you do it to the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you do it to me.*" This is where we will find the risen Christ most of all, on the rainy days, the boring days and the days of our homes and work places.

In this way, this brother was given the greatest gift of all. Not the mind blowing experience of the cell that day, but the truth that he would always find Christ, and be found by Christ, in the midst of life, particularly where compassion and restorative justice are most active. The risen Christ had always been there for him behind the eyes of the poor, looking out at him with hope. The risen Christ had always been there for him in the love of his brothers, reaching out to him in community. The risen Christ had always been there for him in the liturgy and the prayers, listening to him and accompanying him. As the character, Rebecca, says in Sir Walter Scott's book, *Ivanhoe*: "Seek the Comforter, who may hide his face from his people... but who ever opens his ear to the cry of those who seek him in sincerity and truth."

So it is for us, and those we seek to serve. "Often, often, often goes the Christ in stranger's guise"

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