

Easter 3B 2015 Sermon

A Story by John Shea*

Luke 24:36b-48

Jesus himself stood among the disciples and their companions and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you-- that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things."

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In the 13th Chapter of his Gospel, Matthew writes, "Jesus always used stories and illustrations... when speaking to the crowds..." (Matt. 13:34a)

Once in a while I run across a story that strikes me as meaningful enough that I want to share it with you. Stories deliver their message in a different way than sermons do, and different can be good. Besides, if stories were Jesus' preferred way of speaking to the crowds, that's a pretty good endorsement for this way of teaching.

The story I share with you today was written by Fr. John Shea as a commentary on today's Gospel passage. As with many of Fr. Shea's stories, it is whimsical, a bit irreverent, and disarming – and at the same time, it is profound, pastoral, and peppered with Biblical quotes and allusions. It is a story about a modern-day disciple of Jesus who finds himself at a time of disillusionment in his life – like those first disciples of Jesus in today's Gospel, who even after he appears to them risen from the dead, *still* find themselves "disbelieving and wondering."

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It was a wind-blasted winter evening, close to midnight, and the doors of the apartment were locked. Inside the disciple was eating popcorn and riffling through the Gospels. He was reading at top speed, flipping pages, hoping a word, a sentence, a story would make him stop. He was looking for something, but he wasn't sure what it was.

Suddenly Jesus appeared and sat down in the chair opposite him. The disciple blanched. He shook his head, rubbed his eyes, looked away, and then looked back. Jesus stubbornly stayed put. Finally Jesus said, "Got anything to eat?"

"I get it," said the disciple. "That's what you did after you rose. When the disciples thought you were a ghost, you asked for something to eat. It reassured them you were real."

"I was hungry. What is this stuff?"

"Popcorn." The disciple passed the bowl over to Jesus. "Try some, Lord," he said; and the words sounded absolutely ludicrous. He consoled himself with the thought that he didn't say, "Mister Lord."

Jesus took one piece of popcorn and looked at it as though he were examining a diamond with an eyepiece.

"Wonderful shape," Jesus said; "and each one is just a little different. I like them."

The disciple became uneasy. He had never heard popcorn referred to as "them." And how did he know he liked them if he hadn't tasted them?

Jesus put one piece in his mouth and chewed it carefully for close to a minute. The disciple grabbed a handful.

"Not enough salt," Jesus finally said.

"Salt is not good for you," warned the disciple.

"I was always one for a lot of salt," said Jesus. "Hey!" Jesus raised his finger in the air like he was about to give a teaching. "Has anyone tried putting butter on this stuff?"

"It's been done. But butter's not good for you either."

"You are a very careful person," said Jesus.

"Thanks," said the disciple. "Here, have some more." The disciple raised the bowl of popcorn off the table and offered it to Jesus.

“No thanks.”

“You are the only person I know who can eat only one piece of pop-corn and stop.”

“Of course. I’m God,” Jesus said, and laughed.

The disciple did his best to chuckle.

“How come when you eat popcorn?” Jesus said as he stroked his chin, “you try to get as much into your mouth as possible, and it spills out, and you have to pick it off your shirt, and put it back in your mouth?”

“Oh God, I knew this was going to happen.”

“Why does everybody say that when I’m around?” asked Jesus, a bit irritated.
“What did you know was going to happen?”

“You notice everything and make remarks.”

“Don’t you like to be noticed?”

“As a matter of fact, I don’t.”

The disciple closed his eyes. When he opened them, Jesus was still there, smiling.

“Why did you come?”

“To teach you how to eat popcorn.” Jesus looked pleased with himself.

The disciple looked down at the bowl of popcorn on the table. “Are you going to toy with me?” he said, haughtily.

“I am not toying with you. I always come to seek what is lost; and when people are searching through my story at midnight like it was a medicine cabinet, it is usually a sign they are lost.”

“Like hell I’m lost!” the disciple shouted.

“Like hell you’re not!” Jesus shouted back.

Their eyes locked. The disciple was the first to look away.

“It’s a mild case of midlife crisis. I’ll be over it in a couple months.”

The disciple gave a “what can I tell you” shrug of his shoulders.

“Is that what they are calling temptation these days—midlife crisis?”

The disciple laughed in spite of himself.

Slowly Jesus reached over to the bowl of popcorn, took one piece, and popped it into his mouth. Jesus’ obvious enjoyment made the disciple shake his head.

“Even God can’t eat only one piece of popcorn,” said the disciple.

“Especially God,” said Jesus. “Try some.”

The disciple instinctively took a handful of popcorn, but then let some fall back into the bowl. He put the pieces in his mouth two or three at a time.

When both of them had finished chewing, Jesus said in a very gentle voice, “You have been with me now a long time, and you are wondering whether it is all worth it. You are thinking of divorcing me quietly, aren’t you?”

“It has crossed my mind.”

“My friend, you need more chutzpah. Blessed are those who are not embarrassed by me.”

Jesus waited, but there were no words for a long time.

Then Jesus said, “There was a bank robber who planned a heist for a long time. He had worked out the details and was ready to go. But when he got to the bank teller’s window, he suddenly panicked and asked directions to the washroom.”

“Hah! You’re saying I can’t carry through what I set out to do.”

“I’m saying risk the salt on the popcorn.”

“Jesus,” the disciple said in an exasperated tone, “I’m going to lay it on the line. You walk too fast: I can’t keep up.”

“Better to be out of breath behind me than ahead of everyone else.”

“I want a more moderate master so I can be a better disciple.”

“You are a perfect disciple. You’re having second thoughts.”

“That may be accurate, but it’s hardly perfect.”

“My friend, that is the way of the earth beyond the earth. Why live out of something as small as you are? Love me because I am large enough to betray. But I do not think you are happy in the land of mercy.”

“God, you are a bittersweet experience. Why do you say things so harshly?”

“Peter used to say that I was the only one who could say, ‘God loves you’ and get everybody mad.”

The disciple laughed. So did Jesus.

“You laugh at the right places,” said Jesus. Then suddenly he asked, “So, are you going to stick around?”

“Where will I go? ‘You have the words of eternal life’ (John 6:68).

“No fair stealing Peter’s lines.”

“Will you stick around with someone like me?” The disciple sighed like some great build-up of pressure had been released.

“Is that what this is all about? asked Jesus. “[Y]ou know everything; you know that I love you” (John 21:17).

“No fair stealing Peter’s lines. Why did you say that?”

“When Peter said it to me, it blew me away. I hoped it might do the same for you.”

“But I don’t know everything.”

“You know enough.”

“I know that even when I want you to go away, I don’t want you to go away.”

“East of Eden we call that love,” said the Master, and tears ran freely down his face.

In imitation of his master, the disciple cried.

For a long time there were no words, only the silence of communication.

“You know,” Jesus finally said, “after Lazarus came back to life, he told me that what woke him up in the tomb was the sound of my tears” (see John 11:35).

“I can believe it,” said the disciple.

Jesus smiled and reached for a third piece of popcorn. The disciple also took a piece. Jesus closed his eyes to savor better. The disciple did likewise. When the disciple opened his eyes, Jesus was gone. But there was such an incredible lightness to his being, such a revitalization of his heart, that the disciple knew where he had vanished to.

*Taken from John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, pp. 120-123