

Here's an interesting list for you: Mary Magdalene¹; Cleopas and his unnamed companion²; the Eleven Apostles who remained after Judas' betrayal³; and several people who make the list on two different occasions — Peter, Thomas, Nathaniel, James, and John. Pop quiz: what's this a listing of, and how did these folks make the cut?

It's a list of Jesus' Apostles and other disciples who didn't recognize Him after He was resurrected. And they're just the ones we know about because they're specifically mentioned as such in the Gospels. There were undoubtedly others.

Curious, isn't it? Those who had accompanied Him on His travels throughout the Galilee region, those who shared His company and His intimacy, just couldn't quite make out who it was that was standing before them after His Passion. None of them recognized the Risen Christ initially. How do we account for this?

We may never know the answer, but I suspect today's Readings provide an important clue. Our First Reading this morning, taken from the Book of Acts, records the aftermath of an incident that occurred when Peter and John were going to the Temple in Jerusalem to pray. Remember, many — perhaps most — of Jesus' early disciples continued to regard themselves as devout Jews, so Peter, John, and others undoubtedly did this regularly. One one occasion, they encountered a beggar, "crippled from birth," Luke tells us, who asked them for alms. "I have neither silver nor gold," Peter responded, "but what I do have I give you: in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarean, (rise and) walk."⁴ And that's just what the beggar did.

The "priestly class" that controlled the Temple was neither impressed nor amused by this. They seized Peter and John and demanded an explanation for their outrageous conduct. They suspected the worse. "By what power or by what name have you done this?", they snarl. In other words, just who do you think you are? Who gave you license to be causing trouble?

¹ Jn 20:14 (NAB)

² Lk 24:16 (NAB)

³ Lk 24:37 (NAB)

⁴ Acts 3:1-8 (NAB)

Peter replied by telling them “that it was in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarean ... [that] this man stands before you healed.”⁵

Among other ways we can characterize it, the Easter Season is a season of recognition. How do we recognize that the Lord has Risen? *Do* we recognize it? As this morning’s Gospel records, even the Apostles didn’t, at least at first. How, in other words, do we ensure we don’t end up on the non-recognition list, not that we wouldn’t be in good company.

There are at least two ways to end up on the non-recognition list. The people we meet in Scripture who didn’t recognize the Risen Christ when He greeted them shared the first one in common. Before they could recognize the Risen Christ, they had to let go of their ideas, notions, and preferences for how the post-Crucifixion Christ would continue to play a role in their lives. They had tried, understandably, to “freeze” their relationship with Christ in a particular moment, era, or experience. Jesus points to this specifically with Mary Magdalene. When she encountered Him in the garden on the first Easter morning Jesus admonished her because in her joy she had apparently reached out to embrace Him. “Stop holding on to me,” Jesus said to her, “for I have not yet ascended to the Father.” Sometimes we’re in the same position. Sometimes we have to let go of something, we have to let go of how we imagine His presence should and will unfold in our lives before we can accept His invitation to a deeper relationship. This is one of the reasons why tradition for tradition’s sake can be problematic at times. How does this accommodate the movement of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in the life of the Church generally, or in this or any other specific parish?

There’s a second path leading to the non-recognition list, too, one that today’s Gospel suggests. Recall again what Peter said to the crippled man at the Temple who asked for alms. “I have neither silver nor gold,” Peter responded, “but what I do have I give you: in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarean, (rise and) walk.”⁶

“In the name of Jesus.”

⁵ Acts 4:1-12 (NAB)

⁶ Acts 3:1-8 (NAB)

Peter doesn't say to the crippled man that he, Peter, can heal him, but that Christ can. Sometimes we as individuals and we as a Church forget that at best — at best — we're only instruments of grace (at least hopefully we are). We're not its author. Several years ago when we had (for us) a large number of people being received into the Church at the Easter Vigil (as we did this year), a parishioner said to me, "It must make you very happy to lead so many people into the Church." The parishioner was somewhat taken aback when I responded by saying, "I've never led anyone into the Church and I never will. The most I can do is try to hold the Holy Spirit's coat and stay out of His way as *He* leads people into the Church."

The truth is, the Church doesn't save anyone. The Church doesn't heal broken relationships with God and with others. The Church doesn't raise anyone to new life here in this world, let alone in the world to come. Christ does. The Church, and each of us, are simply instruments of the grace, bearers of the grace, through which He does so.

I once heard a Cardinal of the Church respond to a fulsome compliment by saying, "If one admires a finely tailored suit of clothes, one is admiring the tailor, not the hanger upon which it's draped." That's what the Easter Season of recognition is about.

It's about learning not to confuse the hanger with the tailor.

It's about learning that the Risen Lord will appear to us in many, many ways of *His* choosing, not ours.

It's about learning that He isn't bound by our ideas and doctrines.

It's about learning that He, Jesus the Christ, Jesus the Risen Lord, is "the one Morning Star who never sets,"⁷ as we heard at the Easter Vigil, not us. We're simply the people pointing to it.

⁷ "The Exsultet," The Easter Vigil in the Holy Night, The Roman Missal (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), p. 353