

There's a moment in this Gospel. A holy sigh that would be easy to overlook. Cleopas is walking with his partner, who may well have been his wife. They are walking with the Risen Christ, but they don't know who he is. These followers of Jesus see only a stranger because "their eyes were kept from recognizing him."

God isn't preventing them from seeing. Jesus is not traveling inognito. They are unable to see because death just seems to have a way of blinding us. Once these two get to the other side of their resurrection experience, they will have intimate knowledge of God's affinity for bringing new life out of death. But for now, Cleopas and his wife are limited in what they can see.

Relaying recent events, they tell the stranger beside them that today is the third day since their Master was crucified. This is, of course, the day of the resurrection. And on this, the day of God's revelation, they say something so inherently human that it could easily slip right past our attention. "Some women of our group astounded us."

That's the moment; that's the pause, the sigh of the Holy Spirit signaling an awakening.

The word that we translate as "astounded" in Luke's Greek text means "to remove from a fixed or standing position." The Greek root also gives us the word "ecstasy." What Luke wants to convey is that the story of the women at the tomb has propelled people out of a fixed perspective. They are saying: "Some women of our group have caused us to stand beside ourselves." Moments of unknowing astonishment like this are the first step of waking up to deeper spiritual awareness.

Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women have testified that the crucified, dead and entombed Jesus was not in the tomb. And that has thrown Jesus' followers into wonderment. The women's story defies their ability to explain and has flung them into a new world.

If they are going to grow and thrive in this new creation, they will need to perceive the Risen Christ from a new perspective. The Jesus that the woman at the tomb and his other followers have been looking for is the man that they

remember. They remember Jesus who was a remarkable teacher and prophet to a growing community of followers.

That *is* who he *was*. Not all that he *is*.

Fresh in their minds is the trauma of the Roman Empire killing Jesus, who died, apparently, as an utter failure. Cleopas and his wife tell Jesus that the women at the tomb did not see Christ, innocently unaware that they are *even less* able to see the Risen Christ walking with them. If they keep looking for what they *expect* – the lifeless body of a failed rabbi – they will never see who he *is*: Jesus Christ, once crucified, now resurrected.

The more they seek what *was*, the more they miss what *is*.

That's true for you and me as well. Before we can perceive the Risen Christ, we must first be astonished. The resurrection has to nudge us or knock us out of our fixed perspective about the life that God brings forth from death, failure and heart-ache.

Let me tell you a story. Mary Kate O'Flannigan is an award-winning screen-writer who lives and works in Dublin, Ireland. Mary Kate says that her parents gave she and her sisters everything they needed to walk through this world fearlessly, which was five sisters each. "If anything," Mary Kate says, "we had a kind of superabundance of self-assurance." Her sister Olivia thought that a good family motto would be "underprepared, but over-confident."

But all that changed for Mary Kate the morning her sister Catherine called to tell her that their father had died unexpectedly. "We were all pole-axed with shock," Mary Kate says, "but thank God, if there's one thing the Irish do right, it's death."

And so they had a proper Irish wake where hundreds of people came to sit with the sisters, to pray with them, to sing songs, eat and tell stories with them. "And," Mary Kate says, "I'm not going to lie; a drink was taken."

Later, the undertaker came to help with the details of the burial. He asked them for the names of the six men who would carry the coffin. "Well," Mary Kate said, "there are six of us." Without any conversation, the under-prepared, but over-confident sisters agreed. There was nothing they couldn't do together. "We are going to carry the coffin," her sister Sarah announced. And so they did. They carried the coffin shoulder-high from the house to the

church and from the church to the graveyard where they laid him in the broken ground and said good-bye to him.

“You know,” said one of the sisters’ aunts, “for all the great stories that were told, the most eloquent testimony to the best part of that good man’s life was watching the six strong women he raised carrying him to his rest.” But, as insightful as that observation was, it proved to be no comfort to the grieving sisters.

“In the weeks and months that followed,” Mary Kate says, “what I noticed was that we weren’t strong women. We were women who had a source of strength that was taken from us.” Before, they laughed and sang when they were together. Now, all they could do together was cry. The bonds that had kept Mary Kate’s sisters together began to break down as they each retreated into their own grief.

I imagine the women at the empty tomb and some of Jesus’ followers may have noticed something similar. “We had hoped,” Cleopas and his wife tell the Risen Christ, “that he was the one to redeem Israel.” They had to be rattled into astonishment, shaken into a new realization of a higher truth. Just like Mary Kate and her sisters.

You see, six months after the funeral, Mary Kate got a phone call from her sister, Rebecca, who was traveling. Rebecca asked Mary Kate if anyone had been monkeying around with their dad’s phone. Mary Kate went and found the dust-covered phone, its battery dead, and asked her sister, “What’s going on?”

“OK,” Rebecca said. “I sat on the balcony of the hotel last night and I looked up at the sky, and I just said ‘Dad, I can’t go on. I can’t go on if you don’t exist anymore. I’m going to need a sign’.” With empathy, Mary Kate asked her sister what that had to do with their dad’s phone.

“So,” Rebecca explained, “my phone beeped this morning and it said, ‘You have one new message.’ From Dad.” It was the last message her dad had sent to Rebecca while he was alive, but somehow it had been resent, six months after he died. That kind of technical glitch is called “a ghost in the machine.”

The message said, “I’m home now, Bex. You can call whenever you want.”

“Do you think it’s a sign?” Rebecca asked Mary Kate, “Do we dare believe it?” “Rebecca,” Mary Kate answered, “you sent up a prayer, and your father’s unstoppable love penetrated the veil between the living and the dead to send you a sign. I dare you *not* to believe! A plague of locusts you’ll get next!”

And so they went to their sisters and told them what had happened to Rebecca on the road. “And that,” Mary Kate says, “is how my father gave me back the only thing I need to walk through this world unafraid: my five sisters.”

Seems a bit mundane, really, God using an everyday object like a phone to convey love. To express a depth of love that brings wholeness and rebinds relationships; a love that enhances external sources of life and strength with new internal fountains.

But then, when Jesus was at the table in Emmaus, he took plain, everyday bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to two grieving and confused people. That’s when their eyes were opened.

Death, failure, misunderstanding – these are all ways that life can knock us into a new reality. Sometimes, these moments thump us toward ecstasy, bruised and confused. We wake up in a new world, in some new place where the Risen Christ is already walking. And when we have trouble perceiving Christ there, we can prayerfully invite him to “stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.”

The Spirit will bring Christ alive to us to guide our growth into this new reality, this new life with the Risen Christ. The Spirit will illuminate material things of this world – water, bread, wine, oil and an odd cell-phone or two – to become precious carriers of God’s purpose and action.

In the Eucharist, we call the Holy Spirit down upon *ourselves* and upon material things, asking God to do something “resurrection-shaped” in the middle of our worship; in the middle of our lives. We dare to trust that God is bring God’s very self into us, as the bread is broken and the wine is shared, and as we stretch out our hands and open our eyes.

That’s how our Holy Father gives us the only thing we *truly* need to walk through this world unafraid: Jesus Christ. Risen.

Works consulted:

Mary Kate O'Flanagan tells her story in her gorgeous Irish lilt on the Moth Radio Hour or on-line at <https://themoth.org/radio-hour/more-women-in-the-world>

Williams, Rowan. *The Sign and the Sacrifice: The Meaning of the Cross and Resurrection*.
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