

IMMERSE

A JOURNAL OF FAITH, LIFE AND YOUTH MINISTRY

Becoming Physically Present

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In the season between Easter and Advent, I have been living with the stories of Jesus' appearances after his resurrection. One of the things that strikes me each time I read them is their sheer *physical* quality.

One reason for that "physicality" is obvious. The gospel writers wanted to demonstrate that Jesus was raised from the dead as a living, breathing, eating, walking and talking presence. Clearly there were some unique elements to this—for instance, he seems to have moved in and out of physical space in non-typical ways. But the predominant story is his physical presence, a presence that has made all the difference to us, his followers, throughout the centuries.

What is also powerful in these accounts, though, is how Jesus again meets people where they are and as they are. The two he meets on the road to Emmaus are trying to make sense of what has gone on, and Jesus, walking with them, provides explanations. The group gathered in confusion in a closed house receives proof that he is the risen Christ and not a ghost when he eats with them. Jesus cooks breakfast for the disciples who went fishing and also, echoing his first encounter with Peter, directs them to pull up a net full of fish. And we know and relate to Thomas, who needs to put his own hands into Jesus' wounds.

My favorite of these stories is Mary's encounter with Christ on Easter morning. She thinks he is the gardener. There aren't many professions more "grounded" than that one—no specter here! Does Jesus' statement "Do not cling to me" contradict his willingness to have physical encounters with those he meets after Easter? Not necessarily. We know Jesus touched women all

through his ministry, so that was not the issue here. Perhaps that space of time between her cry of "Rabbouni" and his recorded response is in fact filled by their embrace. At the end of that embrace, he moves on, as he moves on also from the disciple-filled house and from the meal table in Emmaus.

Pentecost is HERE. Christ sends the promised Comforter, his Spirit, to live within us. Paul tells us that the same Spirit is within us THAT was in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:11). Amazing words! As Christians, our daily walk is guided by that Spirit, whom we worship in our spirit (John 4:24), AND who prays within us (Romans 8:26).

But, what about that physical presence? Was that just a brief interlude and what matters now is our non-physical spirits? Does the Pentecost experience of receiving the Holy Spirit take precedence over our embodied reality? As I have thought about it, it seems to me that this is not an either/or, but a both/and. We need God's physical presence, and we need God's Spirit. And that is how God meets us still. *God meets us physically* first in our mutual relationships of giving and receiving *and* also through God's created world. God's creation testifies daily to God's abundant giving.

There is more to this physical presence thing, though. We are embodied people, living in a physical world, and that is how God created us. We are not a mistake; although certainly the fall opened paths to use our physical creation in non-godly ways. I think that ultimately it is our bodies that train and tune our spirits to the experience of God with us in Spirit. We do this through our senses, which, after all, are gifts from God. Scripture is full of such references: "Taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34), or AS IN Psalm 15, where we find the blessed person walking, speaking, standing. We kneel before the Lord; we touch the cross; we eat with gratitude; we sing songs of praise. All of these physical acts open us and shape our spirits.

I once asked a monk I know about the challenge of the monastic discipline of showing up seven times each day in chapel to pray. His answer was typically down to earth: "Well, if your body shows up, maybe the rest will follow."

Our lives as Christians are based on our physical behaviors, more than we sometimes acknowledge. We live in the world, we work and walk and love and share and experience life in all its complexity and, perhaps most of all—as we eat and drink together in the shared sacrament of Communion, each of these physically experienced moments can be a path to life in and with God.