

Living a little over two-thousand years after the historical events of Jesus’ death and resurrection perhaps you, like me, have sometimes wondered, “Where and how can I experience the presence of the risen Jesus in my life today?” If we’ve ever asked this question, we have compatriots in the New Testament community to which St. Luke addressed both his gospel and the history of the earliest Christians in its companion volume, the Acts of the Apostles. Being Gentiles these Christians wondered how they could know the presence of Jesus with them. And so, for them and us, St. Luke relates one of the most beloved and beautiful of all the stories of Easter.

The story is well known. It took place on the evening of Easter day. Cleopas and his unnamed companion—perhaps his wife?, or we could substitute ourselves—stride in the direction of Emmaus, a village we are told that is about seven miles from Jerusalem.

Notice two details in the story. First, we might be tempted to think the disciples just failed to recognize Jesus. But this is unlikely. After all, it had only been three days since they last saw him. Could they have forgotten so quickly what he looked like? Note that’s not what Luke says. What he says is that “their eyes were *kept* from recognizing him.” In his resurrected body, Jesus is able to appear to them under whatever form he wishes. In his resurrected body, Jesus can hide himself. Also their grief and other pre-occupations prevented them from “seeing” just as similar experiences can cloud our vision to Jesus or other realities.

Second, notice the state of the disciples’ faith. Do they still believe in Jesus? It doesn’t seem so. Not only are they sad because of what had happened to him, but they don’t even refer to him as the Messiah. Instead, they demote Jesus to just “a prophet”—mighty in deed and word, to be sure—but just a prophet. According to their expectations, the Messiah was not supposed to end up dead on a Roman cross. And even though they’ve heard word of the resurrection, they don’t believe it. As they themselves say, “We *had* hoped he was the one to redeem Israel.” Has this ever happened to us? Have we ever experienced someone, even God, not fulfilling our or my expectations?

So how did Jesus respond to their crisis of faith? What did he do? St. Luke tells us that he interpreted *the Jewish Scriptures* to them, as Peter in turn did to his listeners in today's first reading from Acts, as is done for us in every Mass. Jesus explained how these scriptures held the keys to unlocking the mystery of his passion, death and resurrection.

But the story doesn't end there. In fact, everything that Jesus has done so far is a preparation for what happens next, Jesus accepts their invitation to "*stay*" with them, sits down at table and "*breaks bread*" with them. And in that experience we are told "*their eyes were opened.*" Why were the disciples now able to recognize Jesus only after he sat down at table and broke the bread? And why is it that as soon as they did see him, he vanished out of their sight?

The answer lies in the "breaking of the bread." Until Jesus sat down and *repeated his actions from the Last Supper*, their eyes were kept from seeing him. Only with the breaking of the bread was the risen Jesus made known to them. And then, he vanished. Why? *Jesus was pointing to them to the way he would be present with them from now on.* Jesus was showing the disciples that the Eucharist is his crucified and risen body. And in his risen body, he is no longer bound by space, or time, or even by appearance. The risen Jesus can appear when he wills, where he wills, how he wills, and under whatever form he wills. From now on his normal manner of appearing will not be in human form, but in and through the sacramental symbols of bread and wine which he now designates as his "Body and Blood." That Easter Sunday night was the first Eucharist after the Resurrection, and Jesus was, as at the Last Supper, both priest and victim. On that day, Jesus answered their prayer outside the village of Emmaus when they said to him: "*Stay with us.*" (Luke:24:29).

In the "breaking of the bread," in every Eucharist, Jesus answers our prayer, saying to us—"I am with you always, even to the end of time."
(Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist. Brant Pitre. New York: Doubleday, pp. 198-202.)