

EASTER, 2015
APRIL 4/5

In the 1970s made for television mini-series *Jesus of Nazareth* a man by the name of Zara, a member of the Jewish religious establishment, appears several times. He is the last person we see at the end of the story. Learning of the empty tomb on Easter morning he rushes out to see for himself. Coming out of the tomb Zara's face registers both puzzlement and fear as he utters the last words of the film: "***Now it begins.***" Either the greatest hoax is about to be foisted on the world, or world history from this moment is forever changed by a divine power that no force in heaven or on earth will be able to stop.

When it comes to Jesus' resurrection, there is no middle ground. You either believe it, or you don't. We gathered here have chosen to take Jesus at his word, to follow him, to open ourselves to relationship with him, to believe the story of the holy women and the others who went to the tomb that first Easter Day. But, like them, not being eyewitnesses to the actual moment of Jesus' rising from the dead, how do we know it is real; how do we experience him risen and among us today?

These are valid questions. Physically, an empty tomb is just that—an empty grave that previously contained a dead person's body. In itself it does not "prove" resurrection, any more than it disproves it. It is simply an empty tomb.

The answer to the question of Jesus' resurrection lies in the experience of encounter. Encountering a person is much more than simply meeting someone. We all meet many people every day. But an encounter is a meeting of another at the very depth of a person's soul. To encounter someone is to go beyond a surface meeting. It is to open up space in the depth of my being for that other to enter in and dwell there, as well as accepting the invitation of the other to enter into and dwell in them. Like the first disciples, we come to know and experience the person and truth of Jesus and his resurrection through encounter. While the accounts of Jesus' post resurrection appearances in the gospels vary, what they share in common is the reality of encounter—an encounter which is personal, and communal, experienced in word, in meal, and in community with other believers.

Mary Magdalene at the tomb on Easter morn, Cleopas and his unnamed companion on the road to Emmaus on Easter evening, John, Peter and the other disciples in the boat on Lake Galilee, each were encountered by the risen Jesus. To each of them Jesus appeared in a way that they could understand—a gardener, a fellow pilgrim, an inquisitive man on the seashore. In his glorified and transformed humanity, Jesus was able to assume a human form most suited to his mission. Today, he does the same: a spouse, parent, friend, co-worker, priest, each of us can be, and is (if we are open to Jesus) the physical means he uses to reach out to us, or through us, to others.

All of the persons mentioned in the Easter stories came to faith, recognized Jesus in their encounter through hearing his word. “Were not our hearts burning within us as he spoke to us on the road?” (Lk 24) one of the Emmaus disciples states. In the Scriptures, especially as they are proclaimed here at Mass, we, too, encounter and are encountered by God’s word in Jesus.

In the Emmaus story and the scene of the disciples and Jesus on the shore of Lake Galilee, after an encounter with Jesus in hearing his word addressed, a further encounter occurs through sharing a mea: “and their eyes were opened and they recognized him in the breaking of the bread.” In every Mass, we too, through bread and wine encounter Jesus as surely as the disciples on the road to Emmaus and on the seashore did that first Easter.

Through word and sacrament we encounter the risen Jesus. And having encountered the risen Jesus, like those first disciples we are sent forth now as his body, the body of Christ, the Church to be the instrument, the sign, the sacrament, the means through which Jesus continues to be present and to exercise his ministry in the world today. Jesus, dead and risen now lives in us!

Zara was right. **NOW IT BEGINS!**