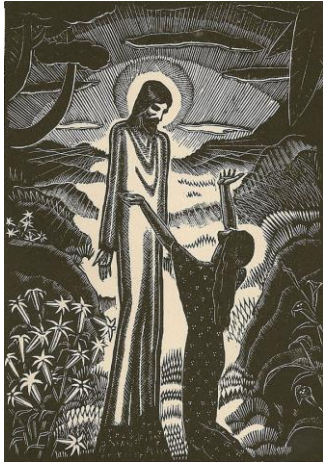


Appearances of Jesus

He's Risen: Reflections on the Risen Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit - Phelim McGowan SJ Columba Press



*On my bed, at night, I sought him
whom my heart loves.
I sought but did not find him.
So I will rise and go through
the City;
in the streets and the squares
I will seek him whom my heart
loves.
... I sought but did not find him
(Song of Songs 3:1-2).*

We need to watch and wait
because Jesus appears and

disappears suddenly and without explanation. It was obviously quite frightening for the disciples, hence Jesus' words of reassurance: 'Peace be with you' (Jn 20:19). The evangelists never elaborate on these comings and goings, because they do not know or understand any more than we do. On only one occasion is there a description of Jesus' disappearance. It is in the account of the Emmaus scene when the writer records: 'He vanished from their sight.' Realising this, we should ask the Holy Spirit to help us understand: 'Lord, let me know your ways; Lord, teach me your paths.'

The risen Jesus is different insofar as he does not seem to be the Jesus of Nazareth the disciples had known before his death. In fact, there is an atmosphere of unreality about him, an unreality that renders him a total stranger to them. Even when the disciples do know who he is, when he appears on the Tiberias shore, they hesitate to speak his name (Jn 21:12). Somehow he has changed. The old familiar feeling of companionship associated with knowing and being known by Jesus of Nazareth, the ordinary man of flesh and blood, has gone and, in its place, he is a man whose heart is filled with a deep sense of peace, trust and belief. Why this change? Perhaps it is due to the terrific joy that swept over his Father's face as he raised his Son to eternal life. 'Well done, my good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of the Lord. Because you have been faithful over small things, I will place you over great. Come and join in your Master's happiness' (Mt 25:21). Was it the overwhelming joy, with which the Father greeted Jesus that changed the old familiar Jesus of earth into the Christ of heaven? In his joy, a joy fully charged with the Holy Spirit, Jesus says: 'Abba, Father'. Jesus' prayer has reached its climax; he can enter into the heart of the psalmist's joy: 'I rejoiced when I heard them say, Let us go to God's house' (Ps 11:22). These words are fulfilled as Jesus returns home. The goal of Jesus' life is to be 'at home' with the Father (Jn 17:24) and it is ours, too. As Jesus prayed (Ps 122) to his Father through the Holy Spirit, so too, the Spirit can give us the power to hear Jesus praying, not only for his friends, but for each of us individually.

The change in Jesus could also be due to the fact that love is only complete when everything is shared with those you love. Jesus now wants to share his divinity with his relatives and friends, to show them who he really is: the Son of God (Jn 15:15). Given their religious belief of God being One (Deut 6:4-5), Jesus had to meet them frequently over a period of time in order to help them assimilate this amazing truth. Perhaps this is why he appeared only to his devoted followers. He was able to create in them a Christian faith, because their love for him opened them up to

receive such an unexpected favour. He could have appeared to Annas, Caiaphas, Pilate etc., but his purpose was not merely to persuade people that he was alive again. His purpose was to allow them to see that he had entered into a completely different existence with his Father. Because they really knew Jesus, the disciples were able to understand his actions and his teachings. They realised the significance not only of what was said and done, but also what was left unsaid and undone. Jesus needed them to have this understanding so they could be his interpreters to the world. He was divine and he turned the world upside down! Through Jesus, God was finally revealed as a God who is Father, someone who is completely self-effacing, a loving father who will go after the 'lost' sheep, the depressed and the lonely. This Christian knowledge is not a purely verbal message that can be relayed to others; it is the experience of a divine relationship, a message which is intended not only to change peoples' ideas but radically to alter their lives (Lk 24:32). It is not just a story about a man. It is an unimaginable phenomenon. The God-made-man has become alive again in a different way (Jn 11:25). That is why the Holy Spirit has to 'remind' the disciples of all that Jesus had said to them (Jn 11:26) and this is also why his Father sends the Holy Spirit on us (Jn 14:26).

Somehow this new life, this new existence with his Father, does not separate Jesus from his mortal body. Jesus is still able to eat with his friends (Lk 24:42-43), Thomas is able to touch his wounds (Jn 20:27), Mary can hear him speak her name (Jn 20:16). It is clear that he is still the old Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus shows that all the relationships he's had during his lifetime, all the emotions, experiences, events, growths, joys, sorrows, disappointments and so forth have made him the person he is and always will be.

The risen Jesus has chosen to remain human forever (Lk 2:52). In this way he teaches his friends, and each one of us who have lived thereafter, that our vocation is to be truly ourselves, to be thoroughly human, to believe, despite external appearances. We may and indeed must hope to enjoy God even within the corporeal and material side of our personalities. The more human we become, the more true to ourselves and the more Christ-like we become. Jesus lived on earth in order to teach us how to become completely human (Mt 5:44-48). Jesus came to redeem the whole person, not merely to 'save our souls'. We always need to thank God our Father for creating us human beings (Ps 139:13-14), and to thank Jesus for overcoming our refusals of love and reintroducing us to his Father (Lk 23:34). Paradoxically, the more we, his followers, are drawn into Jesus' humanity, the greater the faith, hope and love we will need because now we need to have Christian faith, Christian hope and Christian love (Jn 20:29).

Our inherent human gifts of believing, hoping and loving will be deepened. Because Jesus himself believed, hoped and loved, he was able to assist his friends, the disciples, and us, his friends and disciples of today, in recognising these gifts and gradually become permeated by them. How rarely, if ever, do we thank him for these gifts.

Very often, a person is only fully appreciated after his or her death. The full meaning of the scriptures, which Jesus announced during his earthly ministry, was that he would become a living and dynamic force for all, but only after he was delivered up to death. Jesus' humanity, his believing, hoping, loving and dying, sum up everything that united to make him what he is. In his own words: 'I am the Resurrection and the Life' (Jn 11:25).