

“Knowing Beyond Knowing”

When I hear these post-resurrection stories I often respond skeptically. While I listen attentively, my brain is talking back to the Gospel saying something like, “Yea, sure, he just popped into a room with closed doors and windows.” Or “Yep, he broke the bread with the disciples at Emmaus and then he disappeared.” It is as if Jesus flipped open his transponder and said, “Beam me up Scottie” so that he could flit around ancient Palestine. But to a brain educated in post-Enlightenment, post-scientific revolution thought this just doesn’t make sense. This is the stuff of fantasy, sci-fi, or ghost stories.

I think that the gospel writers who recorded Jesus’ Resurrection appearances were hamstrung by the language available to them. They do not have the words or the concepts to explain what they experienced. We as human beings have words for things that human beings know. We do not know resurrection because we have never experienced it. We do not have any way of communicating this strange new world that Jesus has entered through resurrection, how can we be expected to communicate about it effectively.

Even if Jesus had sat the disciples and his friends down and explained to them what this new life was like they would not have been able to understand. The words aren’t there for it. That is where poetry and metaphor come in.

One of Mary Oliver’s best poems in my opinion is “Six Recognitions of the Lord” from her book *Thirst*. In this six-part poem Oliver expresses different ways in which she has experienced God. I think that part four is particularly appropriate given today’s Gospel reading. She writes:

“Of course I have always known you
are present in the clouds, and the
black oak I especially adore, and the
wings of birds. But you are present
too in the body, listening to the body,
teaching it to live, instead of all
that touching, with disembodied joy.
We do not do this easily. We have
lived so long in the heaven of touch,
and we maintain our mutability, our
physicality, even as we begin to
apprehend the other world. Slowly we
make our appreciative response.
Slowly appreciation swells to
astonishment. And we enter the dialogue
of our lives that is beyond all under-
standing or conclusion. It is mystery.

It is love of God. It is obedience.”¹

What Luke is writing is not unlike what Mary Oliver writes—poetry. Because we do not have words to understand resurrection and other mysteries we need poetry. She writes, “Of course I have always known you/are present in the clouds, and the/black oak I especially adore, and the/wings of the birds.” Like so many of us she admits the ability to see the wonder of God in nature. But she goes on to say that she knows that God is present in the body also. Isn’t that what the disciples knew? They could understand God being in the body and that is why they wanted to touch Jesus and were comforted by seeing him eat. If I can touch it I know it is real, that old Enlightenment thinking again. This “heaven of touch” is so wonderful and so comfortable that it takes time to discover our mutability.

But Oliver apprehends that there is something beyond what we can touch; this she calls “disembodied joy.” This is what I think Luke, Matthew and John were trying to get at in their Resurrection accounts of Jesus. There is something different about the resurrected Jesus that is beyond our comprehension. He is still embodied, but his embodiment is different from you and me. It is new and beyond our knowing.

Just as Luke shows us the dawning comprehension of the disciples in their conversations with Jesus, Oliver writes, “Slowly appreciation swells to/astonishment. And we enter the dialogue”. There is something new going on here and we seek to apprehend it with words. But Oliver guides us writing it “is beyond all under-/standing or conclusion. It is mystery.” She reminds us that we are just like those first disciples encountering the risen Lord. We don’t have the words for this new way of being because it is a mystery. It is something unexplainable and unknowable in the cognitive sense. We cannot test it to satisfy our scientific methods or Enlightenment rationale, because it exists outside of what is knowable in those ways.

In the end because it is unexplainable and unknowable we must know it in a different way. Some call it pre-cognitive knowing, others poetry, others intuition and others knowing with the heart. It is this knowing–beyond–knowing that Luke and Mary Oliver describe. It is this knowing–beyond–knowing that made the resurrected Jesus real to the disciples and makes him real to us now. It is this knowing–beyond–knowing that makes the bread and wine of communion something more than what it seems. It is in this knowing–beyond–knowing where we experience the love of God and the promise of new life in the resurrected Jesus.

¹ Mary Oliver. “Six Recognitions of the Lord,” *Thirst* [Boston: Beacon Press, 2007]