

THE RESURRECTION APPEARANCES IN JOHN

Insights for Chaplains

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‘I AM THE WAY, and the truth, and the life.’ (John 14:6) These are familiar words to me as a hospice chaplain, spoken during the many funeral liturgies that I have conducted for patients who have died over the years. The image of Jesus preparing a place for us and then returning to collect us and guide us to the way home feels very comforting: ‘And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also’ (John 14:3). But I have often wondered if the reply that Thomas received when he asked for clarity about the place of which Jesus was speaking left him as baffled as I feel by those words, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life’.

It was during the liturgical readings at Mass after Easter that I had an insight as to what Jesus might have meant when he defined himself in this threefold manner. In the three post-resurrection stories in John, three different apostles meet Jesus and these meetings help to clarify the images that Jesus presents to Thomas in chapter 14. In John 20:1–18, Jesus meets Mary Magdalene and shows himself to her—resurrected—as the Life. She cannot immediately recognise him, and the straightforward reason for this is that it is still dark, but when he speaks her name she finds comfort in her grief. In John 20:19–29 Jesus appears to the disciples once again as resurrected Life, but the central apostle with whom he speaks is Thomas and, in convincing him of the resurrection, Jesus presents himself as the Truth, challenging Thomas’s doubt and confronting him with evidence. Finally Jesus meets the disciples again, in an epilogue to the Gospel, chapter 21, and the central character this time is Peter, with whom Jesus discusses the Way. Jesus encourages Peter to move on from his old way as a fisherman and to take up a less familiar journey as a shepherd.

The Retreat

During a retreat for school chaplains that I led a few months later, I made these resurrection stories the focus for us in thinking about the nature of our role, starting by paying attention to our inner lives as we read the scriptures. By gently listening to our own experiences of meeting Jesus in the scriptures, and considering the encounters between Jesus and Mary, Thomas and Peter, the aim of the retreat was to model for us a way to respond to the inner lives of the children and young people for whom we care. Over the 24 hours there were three sessions, so we took one of the stories from John for each session, as well as looking at a contemporary author or experience to enhance our thinking.

We began by exploring the word ‘chaplain’ itself, which derives from the story of St Martin of Tours. As a poor soldier Martin once encountered a beggar and, having nothing to give him except his cloak, Martin cut the cloak in half and gave one half to the beggar. His act of charity was generous at a time when he had little himself, but more significant was the dream he had that night, in which Jesus met him wearing the part of the cloak that he had given to the beggar. It was largely in response to this dream that Martin persisted in his vocation to serve Christ as a monk. The word *chaplain* is derived from the word for one who cares for the cloak, Martin’s half of which was preserved as a relic.¹

Chaplains are good at focusing on the charitable and practical aspects of Christianity. Many of the primary school chaplains on the retreat had set up a ‘Mini Vinnies’ scheme (a junior group of Vincentians for children aged between eight and eleven),² in which children are encouraged to fundraise for local, national and international projects as well as finding a way to belong to a community of prayer. School chaplains have various strengths as counsellors, but they often have little focus upon the inner life of children as a way to meet Jesus, which (as St Martin discovered through his dream) is where our vocation becomes clearer and where our relationship with God develops. St Ignatius is clear that a guide is necessary to explore the inner life, but that the guide should seek to enable a person to be open to his or her own understanding of God: ‘For what fills and satisfies the soul consists, not in knowing much, but in our understanding the realities profoundly and in savouring them interiorly’

¹ The story is told by the church historian Sulpicius Severus (c. 363–c. 425) in his hagiography of St Martin. See *Sulpicius Severus’ Vita Martini*, edited by Philip Burton (Oxford: OUP, 2017).

² See <http://www.minivinnies.org.uk/>.

(Exx 2). The scriptural study of the post-resurrection stories was welcomed by the chaplains on the retreat as an opportunity to engage seriously with these texts and discover the truth of the gospel stories for themselves.

At each of the three sessions, a chaplain read the passage of scripture to be discussed, and we had five minutes of quiet to meditate upon what the passage was saying to each of us. In pairs we shared something of what had been shown to us. Those who wished to do so were invited to offer their insights to the wider group. There were sometimes similarities in the points people raised but it was noticeable that there was a breadth of understanding that enriched each of us. The chaplains knew each other well and this helped to create an atmosphere of trust and respect.

Jesus and Mary Magdalene (John 20: 1-18)

We began by reading the account of Jesus meeting Mary Magdalene in the garden in John 20. What had commanded my attention was that it is not Jesus' voice that Mary recognises; he speaks to her several times before she knows him. It is the sound of her name that restores her 'vision'. Jesus shows himself to Mary as the Life, but it is his personal address that enables her to hear him. He moves from addressing her as 'Woman' to the specific and intimate 'Mary'. He recognises something of her emotional state when he asks why she is weeping, but he makes a connection with her only when he addresses her personally.

As chaplains I suggest we have to do two things if we are to bring this Life to our students: we have to help them recognise something of their feelings and we have to speak to them personally about their specific situation. An additional guide to our thinking at this point was Kathleen Norris, who



Noli me tangere, by Agnolo Bronzino, 1561

explains how she uses the psalms to help children recognise difficult emotions that are often seen as unacceptable to others, such as sadness and anger. Having read the psalms she invites them to write their own psalm poems that express how they feel. She describes one boy who wrote a poem entitled 'The Monster Who Was Sorry'. She writes:

He began by admitting that he hates it when his father yells at him; his response in the poem is to throw his sister down the stairs and then to wreck his room and finally to wreck the whole town. The poem concludes, 'Then I sit in my house and say to myself, "I shouldn't have done all that" ...' The boy made a metaphor for himself that admitted the depth of his rage and also gave him a way out.

She adds that if the boy had lived in the fourth century the desert hermits might have helped him to see that he was in a state of repentance and that, in recognising his feelings, he could show that he was human, not a monster, after all. 'If the house is messy they might have said, why not clean it up, why not make it into a place where God might wish to dwell?'

We could substitute for the desert hermits in this story the chaplains in our schools, or retreat guides who help us with the Spiritual Exercises. We follow the example of Jesus in recognising emotion and speaking to it in a personal way, but there is also a third action that follows, and that is to give guidance. Jesus offers Mary a role: to be an apostle. Kathleen Norris suggests (through the hermits) that the boy tidies his house. As chaplains, we too may find it appropriate to give guidance about how to manage the feelings by which students and patients sometimes feel consumed. This threefold action of reflecting, speaking personally and guiding appears again when we read the story of Jesus meeting Peter in John 21:15.

The first session ended with each of us thinking of a difficult situation in our work life, concentrating on the emotions that the situation evoked in us and finding a metaphor to carry something of our feelings. We wrote our own psalm poem and shared as much as we wanted in pairs.

Jesus and Thomas (John 20:19-29)

The second session started with a similar exercise, reading the text in John and waiting in silence to let it permeate our thoughts. Thomas desires evidence as a way of discerning the truth, but the aural evidence the disciples give him is not enough. He wants to handle the evidence and touch

³ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead, 1998), 69–70.

Jesus physically. Jesus offers him what he wants, but Thomas recognises, with shame perhaps, the folly of his persistence. Discovering the truth, therefore, is not solely about physical evidence, and maybe ‘the doors were shut’ (John 20:26) is a metaphor for not being able to discern the truth within us or hear the truth from those closest to us. For many differing reasons we persist in thinking that our way is right and therefore corresponds to the truth. We probably think of ourselves as truthful people, but there are times for all of us when hearing or sharing the truth is painful, and we close the door to receiving it, as Thomas does. There are other times when we might take up the role of the rest of the disciples in telling the truth or helping others who are seeking the truth. This resonated strongly with the school chaplains.

Discovering the truth ... is not solely about physical evidence

Alex was a five-year-old boy whose mother came to the hospice where I work for symptom control, but it soon became clear that her disease was progressing and she would die in the hospice.⁴ When Alex learnt that mummy was very poorly, he asked his daddy: ‘Can you fix her?’ Daddy is a paramedic, and so when the little boy was told that daddy could not fix mummy, he asked: ‘Not even if you had your ambulance?’ ‘No, not even then’, his daddy told him. ‘Mummy is far too poorly and everyone has tried very hard but mummy is not getting any better. Mummy is going to die.’ The boy went off to play but was back a few minutes later asking, ‘Who is your boss?’ You could hear his mind working. If daddy is not all-powerful, he must have a boss who is, and who can help daddy out.

The wonder of a five-year-old’s openness in being able to ask the difficult questions is matched by the sensitivity of the father who could answer his child’s question with the truth. The price of falling from the pillar of omnipotence in his son’s eyes is to be in the same place of helplessness as the child. It feels like a long way to fall for an adult—no wonder so many parents explain that they wish to protect their children from the truth. But this father could bear to say that he no longer had the power to save mummy and admit that no one else could either. Alex might have felt anger that it had to be that way—that mummy would die when he was only five—but at least he knew the truth. He was kept in the picture, together with his brother and sisters who were making the same journey.

As chaplains it may not always be our role to answer every question with the truth—we have to protect other people’s confidentiality at times—but we can assure a child such as Alex, if he were to ask us about

⁴ The name has been changed but permission has been given by the family to use their story.



The Incredulity of St Thomas, by Peter Paul Rubens, 1613–1615

whether his mummy was dying, that it is a good question and we might help him to find an answer. Sometimes it is important to know that you have someone to journey with you as you seek the truth. Thomas refuses to trust the knowledge of his peers and has to follow his own path.

Reading this scripture passage slowly allowed us to place ourselves alongside Thomas and think about times when we had been challenged by the pain of having to receive the truth.

Or, by putting ourselves in the place of the other disciples, we could identify with the frustration of having others discard our experience and instead persist in wanting to validate the truth from their own evidence.

In the first session one of the chaplains had asked us why we thought Jesus tells Mary not to cling to him, and in this session we noted that the opposite happens, and Jesus invites Thomas to touch him. Once we had looked at the story of Peter we could offer some explanation as to why Mary is encouraged to turn outwards but Thomas is invited to draw closer.

Jesus and Peter (John 21)

The third session began with a prayerful reading of John 21. Peter is the main character in this post-resurrection story. Peter is like his own fishing net, empty and unfulfilled, and so he goes fishing. He encounters Jesus, who is on the shore. The invitation from Jesus to throw the net out to starboard helps to make Peter the best fisherman he has probably ever been. He catches 'large' fish (every fisherman's dream); his net is full to capacity but not broken (no wasting time tomorrow mending it; see Mark 1:19); the haul is landed safely although Peter has to strain hard to drag the net ashore. It is not clear if the catch provides the breakfast, but we know that fish was on the menu. This haul is counted and it may

be that it is one of the best of Peter's life. He has reached the pinnacle of his fishing career—and immediately Jesus asks him to stop being a fisherman and start being a shepherd!

Richard Rohr, in his book *Falling Upwards*, explains that in the second half of life we may have to go on a journey that is about letting go of what is known and finding a new path. He uses the latter part of the *Odyssey* to show how Odysseus is called to make a second journey 'that is barely talked about, yet somehow Homer deemed it absolutely necessary to his character's life'.⁵ And, Rohr adds, 'You cannot walk the second journey with first journey tools. You need a whole new toolkit.'⁶

Here we have Peter giving up fishing, his 'first world of occupation and productivity', as Rohr describes it, and learning a new path (shepherding).⁷ Rohr lays out the prototype for those embarking on a 'heroic journey':

1. They live in a world that they presently take as given and sufficient
2. They have the call or the courage to leave home for an adventure
3. On this journey or adventure, they in fact find *their real problem*. They are almost always 'wounded' in some way and the great epiphany is that the wound becomes the secret key, even 'sacred', a wound that changes them dramatically, which ... is the precise meaning of the wounds of Jesus! ... Their world is opened up and the screen becomes larger, and so do they
4. The first task, which the hero or heroine thinks is the only task, is only the warm-up to get to the real task. He or she 'falls through' what is merely *his or her life situation* to discover his or her *Real Life* which is always a much deeper river, hidden beneath the appearances This deeper discovery is largely what religious people mean by 'finding their soul'.
5. The hero or heroine then returns to where he or she started and 'knows the place for the first time', as T. S. Eliot puts it, but now with a gift or 'boon' As the last step of Alcoholics Anonymous says, a person must *pass the lessons learned on to others—or there has been no real gift at all*. The hero's journey is always an experience of an excess of life, a surplus of energy with plenty left over for others. The hero or heroine has found the *eros* or life energy, and it is more than enough to undo the *thanatos*,

⁵ Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), xxxii.

⁶ Rohr, *Falling Upward*, xxxv.

⁷ Rohr, *Falling Upward*, xxxv.

the energy of death The hero lives in deep time and not just his or her own little time.⁸

Rohr's explanation of this journey is like a blueprint for Peter's life. Peter leaves his home in Galilee and goes on a momentous journey to Jerusalem with Jesus. He is wounded several times along the way, but perhaps most profoundly in his denial of Jesus. His woundedness becomes the key to this encounter in John 21. From this moment he begins his second stage of life.

In Rohr's example, Odysseus has several people who help him undertake his second journey. The first is Teiresias, 'the blind visionary', who gives him the initial message that he is to undertake a second journey. Once he has set out, Odysseus knows he has reached the end of his second journey when he meets a wayfarer. Teiresias and the wayfarer are guides for Odysseus. In our journeys, too, there will be key people who guide us, and as chaplains we may have various roles to play for our students as guides.

A theme that Rohr talks about in *Falling Upward*, and explores further in his later book *The Divine Dance*, is that of 'mirroring'.⁹ The concept was originally developed by the psychologist Heinz Kohut, who argued that children need three responses from their early caregivers in order to develop a healthy sense of self.¹⁰ The first is *mirroring*: 'a need to feel recognised and affirmed; to feel accepted, appreciated and responded to'.¹¹ A second is for someone whom they can *idealize* and look up to, so that eventually that person's qualities can be absorbed into the child's own life. Thirdly, children need an essential likeness to the caregiver so that, by imitating someone like themselves, they can learn how to live for themselves, in a process called *twinning*.

When Jesus questions Peter as to whether Peter loves him, the Greek word Jesus uses for love is *agape*. But when Peter responds, saying, 'Yes Lord you know that I love you' (John 21:15, 16), he uses the word *philos* for love. Twice Jesus offers him the *ideal* of love—*agape*, the love that means laying down your life for your friends—and twice Peter is unable to match the high expectation and example of love that Jesus offers. The third time Jesus asks, however, he *mirrors* Peter. He asks, 'Do you love

⁸ Rohr, *Falling Upward*, 18–20.

⁹ Richard Rohr with Mike Morrell, *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation* (New Kensington, Pa: Whitaker House, 2016), 49.

¹⁰ See Heinz Kohut and Ernest Wolf, 'The Disorders of the Self and Their Treatment: An Outline', *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 59/4 (1978), 413–425.

¹¹ Ernest Wolf, 'Selfobject Experiences: Development, Psychopathology, Treatment', in *Mahler and Kohut: Perspectives on Development, Psychopathology and Technique*, edited by Selma Kramer and Salman Akhtar (Northvale: Jason Aranson, 1994), 67–96, here 72.

[*philos*] me?’ And Peter responds ‘Yes, Lord you know that I love [*philos*] you’ (John 21:16). Jesus offers him the ideal, but he understands that Peter cannot promise that yet—so he lets Peter know he has heard him and asks with the word that Peter himself uses.

As Teiresias was for Odysseus, so Jesus is for Peter, giving him the divine command to start out again on the second half of life. According to an early tradition, Peter meets a wayfarer as he is leaving Rome to escape from the authorities. The wayfarer is Jesus. ‘Quo vadis?’ asks Peter, ‘Where are you going?’ ‘To Rome, to be crucified again’ is the response from Jesus and, at this point, Peter knows that this is the end of his own journey. So Peter goes back to Rome to be crucified himself, showing his love (this time *agape*) by laying down his life for his friend.¹²

As Peter is commanded to move into the second phase of his life by feeding the flock, as a shepherd rather than a fisherman, so we can see that Mary Magdalene, too, has been given a new mandate. She is no longer a follower of Jesus; instead she is to go before him announcing his ascension. Is this why she is not allowed to cling to Jesus? She is to move into her second journey, whereas Thomas is still stuck in his first phase and still needs to draw close to Jesus before he can begin the second phase of his life.



The Handing Over of the Keys, by Raphael, 1515

¹² This story is told in the second-century apocryphal *Acts of Peter*, chapter 35; see the English translation by Robert Franklin Stoops (Salem, Or: Polebridge, 2012).

The Way, the Truth and the Life

As chaplains we may be in the position of offering an idealized self to our students through the authenticity of the lives we live. We are certainly responsible for showing them the example of Jesus and others they can look up to. But we have another vitally important role, which takes us back to Jesus meeting Mary Magdalene in the garden. We have to name and, in so doing, 'mirror back' to our students the feelings they show us, and hence affirm what they feel. Mary finds the compassion of Jesus through hearing her name and having her grief mirrored back to her. Kathleen Norris helps a little boy discover, through reading the psalms and writing his own poem, that his angry feelings can be heard and tolerated, and are even mirrored to him by the scriptures. Peter, too, finds himself liberated to start the second stage of his journey having been granted both the ideal of love and the accepting mirror of his current emotional state.

These post-resurrection stories flesh out what it means to encounter Jesus as the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. When we read scripture reflectively during the retreat we saw it as a mirror reflecting back to us something of our own situation, in dialogue with the Spirit and hearing its resonances in our lives. When we shared our experiences with one another we were offering each other guidance in responding to the Spirit in the here and now of our lives and work. When scripture was read to us at Mass we listened to the ideal of God's love revealed to us in Jesus. The contemporary guides we took with us on the retreat helped us to relate what we had learnt to how we live out our lives and ministries as chaplains. Experiential learning was fostered because we are a community of like-minded people who listen and respect each other's stories. Rohr says, 'We really do find ourselves through one another's eyes and only when that has been done truthfully can we mirror others with freedom, truth and compassion'.¹³

The richness of this retreat was in the exchange of our own stories and I know I have a fuller understanding of Jesus' words and a stronger appreciation of the paths that Mary Magdalene, Thomas and Peter walked as they were challenged by Jesus to go out and live the gospel.

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¹³ Rohr, *Falling Upward*, 157.