

Coming into focus (Acts 4:32-35; John 20:19-31)

The disciples locked in the room need help in practicing resurrection.

by [Kristen Barger Grant](#) in the [April 19, 2003](#) issue

In the poem “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front,” Wendell Berry’s mad farmer warns against the love of “the quick profit, the annual raise, vacation with pay,” a life which makes one “afraid to know your neighbors and to die.” Instead, the mad farmer exhorts us, “Every day do something that won’t compute. Love the Lord. Love the world”—and finally, “Practice resurrection.”

The disciples locked in the room in John 20:19 need help in practicing resurrection. Mary has already told them that she’s seen the Lord risen from the dead, but her testimony fails to penetrate their reality. Whether they don’t believe her or can’t imagine what her words mean, they remain prisoners of their fear and guilt.

Then Jesus is there, saying at once the most ordinary and absurd thing—“Peace be with you.” Yes, it was the common greeting of the day. But “Peace be with you”? Is that a joke? Peace is the last thing that is keeping these disciples company, and the appearance of their dead teacher doesn’t seem likely to improve the situation.

For Jesus, these words are neither a salutation nor an attempt at ironic humor. They are the fulfillment of a promise. The last time they were together, Jesus told his disciples that, regardless of what they were threatened with in this world, they would share in his peace. But simply saying it had not made it so. Now Jesus Christ the risen Lord has come back to make good on that promise. When he tells them “Peace be with you,” not once but three times, he is giving them what they need to claim that “shalom” as a reality.

“Peace be with you, for death has been defeated.” He shows them the holes in his hands and side, signs that his is the body that was crucified. Yet he stands before them, breathing and speaking and wearing these marks of death like a victor’s medals.

“Peace be with you, for the bonds of sin are broken.” He breathes his own life and his own mission into them by the power of the Holy Spirit. They will now share both his power and responsibility, offering the call to repentance and the good news that God’s grace can wash away the old life and put a new one in its place.

“Peace be with you, for there is more to this world than meets the eye.” He invites Thomas, and all who will come after him, to believe the truth that is too good to be true. We can break free of our demands to touch and to see and trust the witness of the apostles.

The peace Jesus offers is no anesthetic for the soul, no greeting-card platitude about the sun behind the clouds. It is the beginning of a new world, the long-awaited world of God’s shalom. It comes with freedom from fear, sin and death. Jesus opens the door that the disciples had locked, and like the mad farmer, he shows the way to resurrection reality.

In Acts we catch a glimpse of what happened after they walked through that door. The peace that Jesus promised abounds in the Jerusalem church, both in their common faith—“They were of one heart and soul”—and their common life—“No one claimed private ownership . . . but everything was held in common.” There is no chicken and egg question: Did they share everything because “great grace was upon them” or did they receive great grace because “there was not a needy person among them”?

In the power of the Spirit, they lived what they claimed, that fear had been buried in that empty tomb at Easter. They practiced resurrection. People free from death are also free to sell off the old home place or cash in their pension if somebody else needs it. They don’t have to build their security on the backs of their neighbors. Their future has been secured for them.

No wonder there was great power in their testimony to the resurrection. If they encountered those who, like Thomas, demanded proof of this miracle, they invited them home for dinner. So much for the great divide between saving souls and feeding the hungry. So much for the Bible study teacher caring for “spiritual matters” while the finance chairperson keeps an eye on “the real world.” The gospel creates a new world, one in which people are no longer “afraid to know your neighbors and to die.”

During my first year out of seminary, I lived in an urban Christian community that had been ministering to the homeless for over 20 years. An attorney next door was often enraged by the homeless men. For years he waged war against his neighbors, calling police, fire inspectors, the health department, and trying every bureaucratic means to shut the ministry down or push it out. But the community endured these assaults, and eventually there was a cease-fire. Relations were still tense until the day a letter arrived from this man. It contained a large check and a letter of deep regret. The neighbor asked for the community's forgiveness and closed with "Peace be with you."

There was no explanation given for this dramatic change, but I can't help thinking it was the cumulative effect of so many years spent in close proximity to one of God's outposts of peace. In his once-despised neighbors, this man came to see that the promise of reconciliation and a new beginning was not a dream. It was, instead, right next door.