

Consorting with strangers: Luke 24:13-35; 1 Peter 1:17-23

On the walk to Emmaus, Jesus is first recognized as an alien.

by [Edgardo Antonio Colon-Emeric](#) in the [April 5, 2005](#) issue

A funny thing happened to a pastor friend of mine. His congregation was baptizing a family in a river that ran not far from the Hispanic church that he served. As the newly baptized members came out of the water he handed them their baptismal certificates. Afterward, in true Latino fashion, they celebrated a fiesta. Since the whole event occurred outdoors, the ritual and celebration were open for all to see—including a couple of men recently arrived from Mexico. The next day these men showed up at my friend’s church asking if this was the church where they “fixed papers.” These men naïvely mistook the baptismal certificates for official government papers that would legalize their status in this country. In short, they thought that the people getting baptized were receiving green cards.

The gospel stories read in the church during the 40 days between Easter and Ascension also treat cases of misrecognition. At the empty tomb, Mary Magdalene mistakenly thinks that Jesus is a gardener. While on a fishing trip, Peter and the rest of the disciples see a man walking by the shore but do not immediately know that he is the Lord. Most famously, Thomas refuses to believe until he sees and touches the wounds. All in all the 40 days make us reflect on both the possibility and difficulties of knowing Jesus.

The story of the walk to Emmaus is no different. The story is well known and has been variously used to ignite a church renewal movement by the same name, to underline the connection between preaching and the Lord’s Supper, and to uphold the validity of a christological reading of the Old Testament. Yet what most strikes me in this passage is the use of the Greek word *paroikos*, which can be variously translated as stranger, exile or alien. On the walk to Emmaus, Jesus is first recognized as an alien.

“Alien” is an ugly word. It means not only that you are unknown (a stranger) but that you are different and hence do not really belong. I remember telling some of my church members (who had walked across a desert or swum a river to enter this country) that English speakers called people like them “illegal aliens,” to which one member responded: “Like in *Independence Day*?”

On the way to Emmaus those sad, deflated disciples mistook their Lord for an alien. How did they make such a mistake? Was it because he appeared to be ignorant of current events and so betrayed himself as an outsider? Was it that Jesus’ Galilean accent betrayed him as Peter’s did in the courtyard? Who knows?

Now, of course, we know that misrecognition is essential to the structure of the resurrection narrative; the playful game of “hide and seek” the Lord plays with his disciples is not accidental but pedagogic. Christians will not find their Lord until and where he wishes to be found. But is the form in which he’s found irrelevant? Is it completely happenstance that Jesus is mistaken for an alien?

Luther would say that Jesus reveals himself by hiding himself under contrary appearance. What shatters our sensibilities more than the risen Lord, the maker of heaven and earth, coming to his disciples as an alien?

The appearance of an alien, however, is not just a contradiction which the believer is to overcome in order to perceive the real Christ; it is a fitting form for the manifestation of the Lord. First of all, Jesus is a true child of Israel; living in exile was in his blood, so to speak. His ancestors—Abraham, Jacob, Jeremiah—all lived as aliens at one time or another. Diaspora and pilgrimages were not just part of the corporate memory of his people; they belonged to his own personal history, as Matthew’s narratives of Jesus’ exile in Egypt show (Matt. 2:13-14).

Second, though the world came into being through him, Jesus was not of this world; he came from above, and for this reason he was an alien in his own country.

Finally, it seems fitting that Jesus would be recognized as an alien because he is not bound to one culture or region. One does not travel to the holy land to see Jesus: he is made known in the breaking of the bread and in this way makes all lands holy.

Is this association of Jesus with an alien a fleeting one that becomes irrelevant once he is recognized? The unknown author of 1 Peter (let’s call him Peter) doesn’t think so. Peter charges his reader to “live in reverent fear during the time of your exile.”

Christian time is time of *paroikia*, of living as an alien. Peter and the early Christian community believed that the church was a *paroikia* (the root behind the words “parish” and “parochial”), a community of aliens gathered to commemorate the death of one who died outside the gate, one who died as an illegal. This is not simply a ghetto of resident aliens, but an assembly of *illegal* aliens, meaning people who literally have no citizenship here because, as Paul says, “Our citizenship is in heaven” (Phil. 3:20). In other words, Jesus’ alien form does not vanish—it is assumed by the church.

So perhaps “alien” is not such an ugly word. Perhaps those two Mexican men saw more clearly than most of us what the church both is and is called to be. Maybe if I walked with some illegal aliens for a while, listened to what they have to say and invited them to stay, my eyes too might be opened and I too might confess: The Lord has risen indeed!