

“Tom Scirghi, SJ, writes in the language of a good preacher—direct, informative, clear, personal, and with an awareness of his audience. *Longing to See Your Face* addresses the theology, spirituality, and practicalities of good preaching. While primarily addressed to the ordained preacher, this book will appeal to the increasing numbers of ecclesial lay ministers who preach outside the eucharistic assembly, as well as those who faithfully listen to homilies.”

— Jude Siciliano, OP, preacher and instructor in homiletics

“*Longing to See Your Face* is designed for today’s preacher, ordained or lay, experienced or just beginning. I commend this work for its fresh theology of preaching and its clear and comprehensive method of preparation, writing, editing, embodiment, and performance. A fine addition to the preaching library.”

— Thomas A. Kane, CSP  
Boston College School of Theology and Ministry (retired)



# Longing to See Your Face

Preaching in a Secular Age

*Thomas J. Scirghi, SJ*



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## INTRODUCTION

### “Lord, This Is the People That Longs to See Your Face”

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Preaching is the act of talking to people about Jesus Christ. Granted, this explanation is terribly simple. But isn't this the role of the preacher, essentially? The preacher speaks to a specific group of people within a particular context. The preacher may speak to the congregation of a parish, or the students in campus ministry of a college or high school, or the residents of a nursing home, or the children of a parish grammar school. And the preacher tells the story of Jesus Christ who is the Son of God and the Savior of the world. This should seem obvious, but how many homilies have we heard that barely mention the name of Jesus Christ? Preaching will test the faith of a preacher who regularly must answer the question, “Who is Jesus Christ?” The preacher stands between the Lord, who has called the preacher to proclaim the word, and the assembly, who longs to see the Lord. This is one way to think of the congregation: the people that longs to see the face of the Lord.

On All Saints' Day, every year, the church chants the first three stanzas of Psalm 24.

**R/. Lord, this is the people that longs to see your face.**

The LORD's are the earth and its fullness;  
the world and those who dwell in it.  
For he founded it upon the seas  
and established it upon the rivers.  
Who can ascend the mountain of the LORD?  
or who may stand in his holy place?

## 2 *Longing to See Your Face*

On whose hands are sinless, whose heart is clean,  
who desires not what is vain.  
He shall receive a blessing from the LORD,  
a reward from God his savior.  
Such is the race that seeks him,  
that seeks the face of the God of Jacob.

While we repeat the refrain in good faith, we may pause to ask, but how can this be? This plea seems to contradict the experience of Moses at the burning bush when God warned him, “You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live” (Exod 33:20). Moses was permitted to see only the back of the Lord. The sight of God would be insufferable to him and to humans. It is a light so brilliant it would be blinding, like staring at the sun during an eclipse. God who is so “other”—who transcends humanity—stands in inaccessible light.

So how can the psalmist announce to almighty God that this people longs to see his face? This announcement is echoed by Jesus at the Sermon on the Mount, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Matt 5:3-10). Blessed are the pure in heart, that is, blessed are those who are free from all selfish intentions and from self-seeking desires. It seems that both the psalmist and Jesus invite their followers to enter the world of God’s reign. They invoke a new order. Both invert the value of the world and promise that the people may indeed see God. But the people must prepare themselves. They must come before the Lord with clean hands and a pure heart. God’s dwelling is holy and all who enter it should be holy as well.

Some Scripture scholars comment that Psalm 24 was sung as a liturgical hymn. It may have been used in an entrance procession into the sanctuary. It opens with a profession of faith, acknowledging the Lord as the Creator of the universe. It then asks who shall be admitted to the temple. Those who do enter will receive blessings from the Lord. Those who enter God’s reign have been shaped by their loyalty to God. They recognize God as the Creator of all. The prescription for clean hands and pure heart is no mere call for ritual purity. Rather, it questions where we stand in relation with God. Those with pure hearts see, like the psalmist, that “The

earth is the LORD's and all that is in it." Almighty God, who reigned in chaos for creation, still rules over the world.

Today, the preacher, standing in the sanctuary, serves as the mediator between the Lord and the people. The preacher views the people in their relationship with God. The people ask how they may be made ready to meet the Lord. Preaching is about preparing the faithful to meet the Lord. The ordained preacher emerges from the faithful and is authorized to lead them in seeking the face of God.

Preaching is a most important work of the priest. The church declared at the Second Vatican Council, "For since nobody can be saved who has not first believed, it is the first task of priests as co-workers of the bishops to preach the Gospel of God to all. In this way they carry out the Lord's command, 'Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature' (Mk 16:15)" (*Presbyterorum Ordinis* [Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests], 4).<sup>1</sup> The priest's duty to preach follows from the command of Jesus to his disciples. The Catholic Church realizes the power of the word, when proclaimed from the pulpit, to reveal the presence of God in our midst. We receive the Body and Blood of Christ with the Eucharist; we receive the word of God with the proclamation of the Scripture. To illustrate this, consider the fourfold presence of God as described in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy). In the celebration of the Eucharist, Christ is present in the person of the minister, in the eucharistic species, in the assembly of the faithful, and "He is present in his word since it is he himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in church" (7).

At this point, some readers may comment, "But don't we know this already?" Maybe so. But experience has shown that some welcome the chance to hear this once again, while others may hear it for the first time. As I have held classes in preaching across the United States, as well as in Asia, Africa, and Australia, two concerns continue to surface. One is theoretical and asks, "Why do we preach? What is the purpose of preaching?" The other is practical, asking for new strategies in preparation and helpful points for presenting the homily. I think of these classes, whether with seminarians or seasoned preachers, priests, deacons, and laity, as

an exercise in finding one's voice. The instructor cannot tell the students how to preach so much as free them to articulate an ancient message for a modern audience. There is also truth to the adage that "preaching is caught rather than taught." This is to say that learning to preach is similar to learning an art or a sport. We may learn much from manuals and mentors, but eventually we must adapt the instruction and experience to our own ability.

With this in mind, the book begins with a discussion of the purpose of preaching. It offers a theological sounding on proclamation, and takes up several descriptions of the role of the preacher in relation to the congregation. It also addresses some current theological issues for the contemporary preacher. The second part of the book takes up the practical matter of preparing to preach. It proposes a method of preparation by following a pattern of, what I call, the four Rs: reflect, research, write, and rehearse. The third part focuses on two specific sacramental celebrations, namely, the funeral and the wedding. In workshops on preaching, priests and deacons often ask for special instruction on these two sacraments.

The audience for the book is threefold. First, it is written for ordained preachers—bishops, priests, deacons, and seminarians soon to be ordained. It is hoped that it will serve this audience either as a primer or a refresher manual. Second, it is written for ecclesial lay ministers, a growing office in the Catholic Church. These ministers are called upon to preach for funeral vigils, liturgies with children, Sunday eucharistic worship when a priest is not available, and on spiritual retreats. Through their study of the Christian tradition and their experience in ministry, they bear a message from the Lord for the people of God. Also, it should be noted that, while the book is written within a Roman Catholic context, it is hoped that the sections on purpose and preparation will be found relevant to all Christian preachers. Third, the book is written for the faithful who sit and listen faithfully to homilies Sunday after Sunday, on weekdays as well. They spend time on an annual retreat; they celebrate weddings, baptisms, and funerals with family and friends. Through all of this they hope to hear a word of encouragement from the Lord. It is hoped that the contents here may help the congregation to appreciate more of what

is spoken from the pulpit and how it is presented. Perhaps it will provide criteria for the congregation so that they may offer constructive feedback to their preachers. There is no shortage of worshipers wishing to comment on preaching—what they admire about their preachers and what they find unsatisfying. And the preachers come to understand their pastoral role, standing before these people, the ones longing to see the face of God.



## PART I

### Is Anyone Listening?

---

Is anyone listening? I wondered this one day on a flight from Los Angeles to Las Vegas. It was my regular visit for a diocesan weekend workshop on preaching. I have come to enjoy these occasional weekends, working with deacons and lay ministers, preparing them to evangelize: to spread the good news and to become heralds of the word of God. At the risk of sounding “over the top,” isn’t this the purpose of preaching? A course in preaching is more than a public speaking course. The message we preach gives us words to live by and, at times, to die for.

These ideas streamed through my mind as the airplane was about to take off. The flight attendant interrupted my thoughts, though, with the required safety announcement. For those who fly regularly, the instructions are familiar: how to buckle your seatbelt, where to find the safety exits, how the oxygen masks will fall from the overhead compartment in case of low cabin pressure, that there’s a life vest stowed under your seat to be used in the case of a water landing, and absolutely no smoking on board the aircraft . . . now, relax and enjoy the flight. I suppose it’s the teacher in me that wants to respect the speaker at the front of the room, so I gave my attention to him. As I looked around, though, I saw most of the passengers ignoring him. Some had their heads buried in books or magazines, or their ears covered with earphones. Others had fallen asleep. I listened to the attendant recite from memory the airline’s instructions in a dutiful manner. Some of us chuckled when he explained the instruction of what to do in case of an emergency water landing. In flying from Los Angeles to Las Vegas the land below is almost all desert. The only water landing would

occur if we landed in someone's backyard pool! But this is part of the regular instruction and so it must be announced.

The attendant fulfilled an obligation, but was anybody listening? After all, we passengers really do not expect anything to go wrong. Hopefully the most difficult part of the trip was dealing with security. We just want this plane to get up into the air and get us to our destination. These instructions really do not matter much. We respect that the attendant has a job to do and that he has to make his speech, but the passengers do not have to listen. It then occurred to me: Is this what preachers face on any given Sunday? Given that I was flying to a preacher's workshop, I saw the flight attendant standing like a preacher before a congregation.

The preacher is, to say the least, fulfilling an obligation. The Sunday celebration of the Eucharist requires a homily. According to the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, "On Sundays and Holydays of Obligation there is to be a Homily at every Mass that is celebrated with the people attending, and it may not be omitted without a grave reason" (66). And so the preacher speaks to us about the good news of Jesus Christ. But how often will the congregation receive this message like the airline passengers? Sometimes a congregation may act as if they do not expect to hear anything new or different. They act as if it really doesn't matter. And sometimes a preacher can act as if he does not expect his words to make a difference. We all march through the routine of worship. Fred Craddock, a New Testament scholar and a fine preacher, compared some preachers to swimming coaches who bark instructions to their athletes from the side of the pool, but do not expect anyone to jump into the water.

Why does preaching matter? In short, because preaching provides an opportunity to encounter Christ. In the words of Pope Benedict, in his address to the bishops' synod on the New Evangelization, "Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction."<sup>1</sup> In this way preaching is sacramental. Each of the sacraments provides the faithful with a special opportunity to meet the living Lord. The word of God mediated through the church's minister comes alive for us in new ways. We should explore this topic in greater depth

and ask, what is the purpose of preaching? To answer this question, we will discuss three authors: a bishop of the early Middle Ages, a contemporary theologian, and an evangelist. Each one offers us a way to appreciate the importance of evangelization.



# CHAPTER ONE

## Why Do We Preach? The Purpose of Preaching

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Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.

—Mark 16:15

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Saint Augustine gives us a good description of preaching. It is commonly known that Augustine was well poised to advise preachers. He studied rhetoric in Milan and became a master in the art of persuasive speech. After his conversion to Christianity he used the tools of rhetoric to promote the Gospel. In his book *On Christian Doctrine* (part IV), the bishop of Hippo provides what may be the first manual on preaching. Referring to the “Orations” of Cicero, Augustine writes, “A certain eloquent man said, and said truly, that he who is eloquent should speak in such a way that he teaches, delights, and moves. . . . To teach is a necessity, to please is a sweetness, to persuade is a victory” (Orations 21.69). An eloquent speech should teach, delight, and move. Let’s say a word about each of these.

For Augustine, to *teach* while preaching means to instruct on matters of Scripture and the teaching of the church. Good preaching helps to expand and deepen our understanding of the Bible and the tradition so that we grow as members of the baptized community. As Christians we ask ourselves, What does it mean to be a Christian today? How do I express my faith in Jesus Christ who is the Son of God and the Savior of humanity? To be clear, to

teach, in this sense, does not mean to turn the ambo into a professor's podium. The preacher is not supposed to deliver a lecture on the Scripture or on a moral concern of the day. Rather, the people should hear an old story in a new way and understand how to adapt it to their lives. Moreover, the preacher may want to enlighten the congregation on an appropriate teaching of the church. This is how the preacher "teaches."

To *delight* means to inspire. The word is derived from the Latin root *inspirare*, meaning to breathe upon or into. Recall after the resurrection when Jesus greeted the disciples by saying "Peace be with you," and breathed the Holy Spirit upon them (John 20:21-22). The disciples knew they were in the presence of the Lord. In a similar vein, Augustine prays, "Lord, my faith calls upon you, that faith which you have given to me, which you have breathed into me by the incarnation of your Son and through the ministry of your preacher" (*Confessions* 1.1.1). Sacramental preaching should provide an opportunity for the listeners to encounter the risen Lord and to breathe in the Spirit of the Lord. It should be clear that, by "delight," Augustine did not mean for the preacher to entertain. The pulpit is not the place for telling jokes or spinning folktales. Instead the congregation should hear the Scripture in a new way, one that speaks to their hearts, and provides the listeners with an opportunity to meet the Lord in their own lives. It is when we hear a person say, "Preacher, it is as if you were talking to me!"—this person felt inspired.

To *move* means to leave the listeners wanting to respond to the message and offering a means by which they may respond. It is as if they say, "What can I do now?" Jesus Christ is no mere celebrity from whom we ask an autograph and a selfie, and then leave him. Meeting the Lord requires a response from us. As we listen to him in the proclaimed word, perhaps we hear a personal call and are moved to more fervent prayer, or to more generous service, or to a change in our lifestyle. Now that we have heard the word of God, what difference will it make in our lives? We find a good example of this "movement" with Peter preaching at Pentecost. Recall the scene on that feast day in Jerusalem. At first we see Peter in the Upper Room, cowering with the crowd of apostles, all of them fearing for their lives. And with good reason. They worried

that they would be charged with being associates of Jesus and meet the same fate on Calvary. Then the Holy Spirit intruded and inspired them all. In a remarkable transition Peter courageously stepped onto the balcony and preached to the crowd below. He told them of how Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah of whom the prophets spoke. He argued that Jesus had been unfairly sentenced to death and suffered brutally. Nevertheless it was because of his death and resurrection that humanity has been forgiven for its sinfulness. He must have moved them with his speech, for as St. Luke reports,

When they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, 'Brothers, what should we do?' Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.' . . . So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:37-38, 41-42)

Preaching should move the listeners so that, as the psalmist says, "O that today you would listen to his voice! / Do not harden your hearts" (Ps 95:7-8).

Teach, delight, and move. Augustine borrowed this scheme from classical rhetoric and applied it to preaching. We can imagine, then, that after Bishop Augustine preached in his cathedral at Hippo, he would hope to hear some members of the congregation say, "Good sermon, bishop. I learned something new today. You gave me an insight into the Scripture. Also, the way you presented your message challenged me; it was as if you were talking specifically to me. And now I know what I must do to keep faith with the Lord." This ancient rhetorical scheme still provides a framework for the purpose of preaching.

For a more contemporary description of the purpose of preaching we might think of it as "naming grace." This idea comes from the book *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination*, by Sr. Mary Catherine Hilker. A member of the Dominican Order, Sr. Hilker is professor of theology at Notre Dame University. She

describes preaching as the art of naming grace in the depths of human experience.<sup>1</sup> Let's look at two terms here: "grace" and "the depths of human experience."

"Grace," very simply, refers to the presence of God. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "Grace is favor, the free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God, . . . partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life. Grace is a *participation in the life of God*."<sup>2</sup> Hilkert says that in Christian worship we celebrate the mystery of God's presence here and now (46).

To illustrate the "depths of human experience" Hilkert cites the Scripture story of the apostles Peter and John healing a lame man. This story is found in the Acts of the Apostles, 3:1-26. In this story Peter and John were on their way to the temple for prayer. They passed a man who had been lame from birth. The man asked them for money. Peter told the man that they had neither silver nor gold, but commanded him, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." The man leapt up and walked into the temple with Peter and John, and there gave praise to God. The other people who were milling about recognized the man and were astonished to see him walking. Peter then addressed the crowd. He assured them that it was not the power of the apostles that cured the crippled man. Rather, "the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you." After explaining this, Peter went on to chastise the crowd, for, in their ignorance, they put Christ to death. He then told them to "repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord." Hilkert sees Peter as a model for the preacher. He interprets what is happening in the depths of the community's experience and points to the power and the presence of God. In other words, he names grace (45).

Notice the double-edged sword entailed in "naming grace." On the one hand, it is comforting to know that God dwells with us, revealing himself through an act of miraculous healing. On the other hand, we are challenged to respond to God's presence in our midst. We must either accept it or reject it. Peter accuses the crowd of having rejected Christ, sending him to his death. But

now they have the opportunity to repent, to convert, or, in his words, to turn again. Think of the Rite of Baptism when Christians renounce the lure of Satan and turn toward the Son of God. The presence of God is not merely an announcement; it is a summons, a call to follow him. Recall the gospel stories where Jesus meets the disciples. He does not simply announce himself, as if he were an itinerant rabbi seeking followers. He commands them: "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people" (Matt 4:19). And they do. Yet, considering the human condition, this is easier said than done. As we plumb the depths of human experience we realize how difficult it is to respond to the word of God. Hilker cites Richard Lischer, who says, "Any theology that takes the Word of God seriously must reckon with its greatest source of embarrassment: the word must be spoken and received by sinful human beings."<sup>3</sup> In Christian worship we hear sinners preaching to other sinners about the promise of salvation.

Of course it is one thing to hear the story of Peter and John with the lame man and to be astonished by a miracle cure. From the healing action of the apostles we are directed to divine revelation. However, as Hilker notes, in the contemporary world the experience of God for most people comes in the face of, and in spite of, human suffering (49). The prevalence of human suffering around us raises the old question of theodicy: How do we justify our belief in God, who is all knowing, all powerful, and all good, in the face of such evil? To address this conundrum Hilker calls on another Dominican, Fr. Edward Schillebeeckx, and his concept of the "contrast experience." According to Schillebeeckx, while the experience of the majority of humanity is that of suffering and the apparent absence of God, a still deeper mystery is revealed by their response to that suffering, namely, a response of protest, hope, and sheer endurance. Human beings are able to cling to life against all odds, and cling to God even when God is silent. That kind of human resistance and hope can be sustained only by a deeper spirit of life, which is the Spirit of God within humanity (52). In short, the contrast experience recognizes the tremendous capacity for hope that pervades the human condition. To experience hopefulness in the midst of suffering will serve to proclaim the presence of God.

For example, after the tragedy of September 11, 2001, many people were left asking, "Where was God in all of this?" Some rushed to defend God in this tragedy. A friend of mine tried to answer the question. She explained to me that while so many people complained of not finding God in the wake of this tragedy, with over three thousand people dead, they failed to notice the number of people who were saved. "This is where God was," she explained triumphantly, "standing with the saved!"

Well, excuse me for sounding cynical but I could not accept this apologia, and I told her so. Her explanation seems to suggest that God saved some of the people but, for some reason, just could not save everyone. It is as if God swung by the devastated area with a rescue boat; however, the vessel was not big enough for all the victims. Only some could be saved. Personally, I do not find this explanation consoling. Instead, I prefer the words of a preacher whom I heard shortly after that day. He reminded the congregation of one image from that fateful day that was still etched in our minds—the image of the first tall tower, an inferno, with flames shooting out from its two sides. The tower and the flames made the shape of a cross. Then, a second airplane crossed in front of the first tower. It looked like a spear piercing the side of the cross. The preacher then said, "There was Christ—with the dying."

Again, the purpose of preaching is to name grace, that is, to locate Christ's presence here and now. We need to be wary, though, of finding Christ solely with the success stories, for example, of locating the Lord with those who have been cured of cancer, or with those who have found what they were looking for, be it a job, a home, or a partner with whom they will share their lives. God dwells with them certainly, and we should be grateful for our good fortune. However, an overemphasis on finding God with the success stories may make some wonder if God has abandoned them—if they are not cured of cancer, or if they did not find what they were looking for. God dwells also with the failures and the losers. Their loss may be transformed into a means of finding the Lord, and this becomes a sign of grace.

Furthermore, Christians are hopeful rather than merely optimistic. Optimism is good, certainly. It is good to be looking on the

bright side of life, to see the light at the end of the tunnel, or to judge the glass to be half full rather than half empty. All of this is good. But Christian hope goes deeper. Guided by hope we trust that, together with God, we will thrive. It is when you cannot find a bright side to life, but you still hope. (As we read in the Letter to the Hebrews, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” [11:1].) It is when you cannot see the light at the end of the tunnel, but you still hope. (Remember the words of Psalm 139, “even the darkness is not dark to you; / the night is as bright as the day, / for darkness is as light to you” [v. 12].) It is when the glass is neither half full nor half empty; it is just empty and there is nothing left. (Remember Jesus’ first miracle, during the wedding at Cana, when the surprised steward exclaimed, “But you have kept the good wine until now”! [John 2:1-11].) Hopefulness—the disposition of remaining hopeful—is the crux of Christianity. When we think it is over, that all is lost, and we are shrouded in darkness, that is the time when God gives us more, and better than we could have imagined.

So the preacher names grace—the presence of Christ in our midst—in the successes as well as in the failures. In the attempt to name grace we describe how Christ is present to us here and now. In every event of our lives, from funeral to festival, and through the routine of daily life, Christ stands with us and speaks to us; can we hear him? In Hilbert’s words, “To tell the human story in its depth, as Jesus did, is to point to the mystery of God at the heart of human existence, to ‘name grace’” (53).

Here is one final note on the purpose of preaching, taken from the evangelist St. Luke. We can learn a lesson from the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). In this story we hear one of the disciples ask, “Were not our hearts burning . . . while he was opening the scriptures to us?” Recall how, along the way to the town of Emmaus, the two disciples encountered a stranger. The recent events in Jerusalem had worried them. They had heard an outrageous rumor that Jesus of Nazareth had risen from death. It was outrageous because no one had ever risen from the dead in all of history, as far as they knew. Yet, who would make up such a story? But if it were true, their lives would be changed forever. As disciples, they would not be able to return to their

ordinary way of life; they would live their lives on mission. And so they wandered in a quandary.

Along the way they met a stranger. He chided them for their confusion: “How slow of heart [you are] to believe.” Then the stranger rehearsed salvation history for them, from the patriarchs through the prophets to the present, enabling them to see that the one who was crucified was the one of whom was prophesied. The disciples may have seen a connection between Jesus and the Messiah, but they still could not see the stranger for who he was, at least not until they would break bread together. Later on, they followed the Jewish custom of hospitality, inviting him to spend the evening with them. As they sat down for dinner they also invited him to pronounce the blessing. Following the Jewish practice he took a piece of bread, gave thanks to God for the food they were about to eat, and broke it in order to share it. Suddenly there was a flash of recognition: Indeed, he is the one of whom the prophets spoke and who was glorified by God. I imagine the two disciples sitting there stunned, staring in awe at the broken bread while their guest had vanished.

Then one of them spoke up, “Were not our hearts burning . . . while he was opening the scriptures to us?” Let us pause and consider the power of this word “opening.” Sometimes it has been translated as “explaining,” suggesting a didactic approach to the Scriptures, almost like a classroom setting where a teacher might explain a passage of literature. But a closer look reveals a more vibrant message. In this passage, Luke the evangelist uses the Greek word *dianoigo*, meaning “to open.” The word means more than simply opening a book or a bottle of wine. It is interesting to note that there is one other place in the gospel where Luke uses this same word. We find it in the account of the presentation of Jesus in the temple: “[A]s it is written in the law of the Lord, ‘Every male that *opens* the womb shall be consecrated to the Lord’” (Luke 2:23, NABRE).

This is a most dramatic opening. The firstborn child, who is received into a loving household, has a way of rejuvenating a family. This child changes the relationships within a family. I can imagine a similar experience for the two disciples—similar in that they were rejuvenated because their relationship with Jesus Christ,

and with one another, was renewed. Their faith, which lay dormant since the crucifixion, was now revived. The Scriptures were opened to them and they found themselves within the story. The word of God came alive to them, and consequently they cannot return to life as usual; they now belong with Christ and with the Christian community.

It is ironic that they recognize Christ in the breaking of the bread. For isn't this what happens to them? They are broken like the bread. They are changed; their lives are reoriented; they are broken open so that they may receive the word of God. In fact, we could find a parallel between what Jesus does with the bread and what he does with all his disciples. At the Last Supper, Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and then gave it. In a similar way, Jesus called his disciples. Recall the scene at the Sea of Galilee when Jesus commanded Peter and the others to drop everything and follow him. He called them, they responded, and he "took" them. Later he "blessed" them, thanking his father for them. Later still, he needed to "break" them, that is, to change their way of seeing so that they would come to recognize him as the Son of God. Recall, too, their many moments of doubt and confusion, and Jesus' frustration with them. For example, there was the time when Jesus scolded Peter, telling him, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (Matt 16:23). Peter's way of looking at Jesus needed to be broken so that he could see as Christ sees. Finally, he "gives" them, missioning them to the ends of the earth, instructing them to heal the sick, to forgive sins, to teach and to baptize. As Jesus did with the bread, so he did with his first disciples, and continues to do so, to this day.

Note that the breaking of the bread was a most significant action for the early Christian community. It defined them. Before they were known as "Christians," they were referred to as the people who break bread together. Indeed, they were true "companions" of the Lord and of one another. The word "companion" is derived from the Latin *cum pane*, meaning "with bread." In Jesus' day, companionship was demonstrated by sharing bread.

The two disciples on the road to Emmaus recognized Jesus in the breaking of bread. When Jesus opened the Scripture he did

not merely explain a lesson to the disciples. Rather, like a great storyteller, he opened the story so that they would find themselves within it and their lives would be renewed. Good preaching continues to open the Scripture so that the faithful may find themselves within the gospel story once again.