

Coming into focus: John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15; Acts 2:1-21

by [William R. O'Brien](#) in the [May 31, 2003](#) issue

"When the Counselor comes!" What was Jesus trying to tell us? His words came after an embarrassing incident. When none of us disciples was willing to wash someone else's feet, Jesus did it. Our rabbi and leader. Not until much later would we understand what he was doing; on that night we could only listen and try to make sense of his words.

Jesus laid some heavy stuff on us, stuff about loving one another. He talked of radical things, like being hated—and hinted at the possibility of even being thrown out of synagogues. Yet he also intimated that someone—this Counselor guy—would come soon.

He had held back from talking like this on previous occasions, but we could sense that tonight we were on to something big. We argued among ourselves as to which of us would be the executive assistants. In fact, two of the brothers had a plan big enough for three—the two of them and Jesus in the middle.

Jesus ended the meal and dialogue with an intense prayer. Then he went out into the night and everything came unraveled.

We were suddenly alone, and felt afraid and forsaken. Jesus was to have been the conquering messiah with an "In your face, Rome" attitude. What went wrong? More important, where would we go now? Who among us would claim to be a follower of a misguided memory?

Then faithful women brought the electrifying news: He is alive! From that moment on we felt as if we were on fast-forward. Jesus appeared, and met with us several times. Now he was even more focused about what was going to happen, and pointed out that everything said about him in the Law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms had been fulfilled. He had suffered and risen from the dead. Now forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed to every ethnic group, starting in Jerusalem.

Again he said, "The Counselor is coming," but this time he added, "Stay in the city until you have been empowered." He was gone and once again we didn't know what

he meant. But this time it was different. This time we waited.

To the very end the disciples viewed Jesus through the paradigm that had shaped them. One reason for their misperceptions of Jesus and his kingdom priorities might be that “the ministry of the Spirit was inseparable from Jesus’ physical presence with them. The disciples were so satisfied with the tangible association that none of them had asked where he was eventually going,” says William E. Hull, professor at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama.

So what difference did it make that they waited?

Pentecost gave them a new lens with which to view the Master’s grand design. Gone was the competitive spirit. Gone were the visions of a conquering conquistador. Gone was any advantage of privilege. It was meltdown time, and no one was prepared for the outcome. Galileans, who were not known for multilingual skills, were suddenly proclaiming the good news in languages known only to foreigners. When the crowds needed an explanation, Simon Peter emerged as a powerful apologist and convincing proclaimer.

But except for Peter there were no stars in this cast—just simple Galileans empowered through the indwelling Spirit of Christ. Whether they were unnamed believers or public proclaimers, they all began a journey that would be full of surprises. As Hull says, “Ultimate reality was not to be sought in a set of timeless facts which may be mastered at any moment, but in companionship with the Spirit of truth who leads one on a pilgrimage of discovery.”

And so it is today. As my own pilgrimage of discovery continues to unfold, I find my life filled with surprises. I thrill to sermons by gifted proclaimers such as Barbara Brown Taylor, Fred Craddock and Gardner Taylor. I’m also inspired by less-known Christ followers who serve in the trenches.

In Lesslie Newbigin’s Bible studies for the 1986 synod of the Church of South India, he said: “Words without deeds are empty, but deeds without words are dumb.” In the mission of Jesus, said Newbigin, there is both the presence of the kingdom and its proclamation. Like a seamless robe, word and deed proclaim and authenticate the news that the kingdom is at hand. The promised Counselor is the one who makes the proper application to both persons and systems.

I once followed a team of American doctors in Venezuela. When their medical equipment did not arrive, they were forced to “make do.” They partnered with local doctors and pastors, and were empowered to function effectively, even miraculously in some cases—and they were changed by the experience.

I’ve followed an educational team to Monrovia, Liberia, where team members equipped trainers of teachers nationwide. In a war-torn climate, they brought hope to teachers who are short on resources but strong on love for the students. Hope was born anew.

In an inner-city multicultural, multiethnic church in my town, pastor and people demonstrate the will to advocate for church members, half of whom are homeless. These advocates dare to go up against the structures that not only oppress their people but also make them “invisible.”

The body of Christ receives and shares the same gift that the disciples received. This gift of the Spirit is as fresh today as it was at Pentecost. That is a promise, and it still holds for those who are on a pilgrimage of discovery.