

Blessing and withdrawal

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From Easter morning until Ascension Thursday, Jesus is present and absent, enfleshed and distant, there and not there. He breaks bread and disappears. He shows up like a ghost, and then eats fish like everyone else. At the end of the story he blesses them, and then he withdraws.

It's striking that the disciples' response, rather than to be confused or bothered by this yes and no of resurrection, is to head back to Jerusalem and worship with great joy. I think I would have wanted more: more time with Jesus, more assurance that all of those sayings that now seemed hard to remember and a little unrealistic were what he meant to say, more assurance that resurrection was the final word, more encouragement to take up the mission, more peace, more presence, more, more, more.

I guess I'm the true American consumer, a bottomless pit of desire. I'm formed to want more and more. I assume that being so fully in the presence of Jesus would make me want more and more Jesus, as if I'm a spiritual addict who desperately needs more grace to survive.

Yet the disciples, after each partial and mysterious revelation, respond with worship and joy. How is it that these moments of blessing, and then loss, are enough?

Maybe that's part of the message of these strange Ascension stories. It's the withdrawal of Jesus that makes us enter life with joy and worship. We cannot experience the fullness of incarnation while Jesus is present like he was in history. We need his blessing, and we need him to withdraw, so that we can discover that what we have is worthy of joy and worship.