

Meditation on a crucifix during class

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Why is the Jesus on that crucifix so small?

The cross overshadows him, dwarfs him. This is what I think about in my Aquinas class. I'm trying to pay attention, really I am. I want to be respectful of the professor. He is a very kind man, a brilliant scholar, enthusiastic about his work. He's offering us a gift in his running of class, and I want to receive his gift, honor it, offer the corresponding gift of my attention and presence.

But I cannot do it. I am drawn to this disproportionate crucifix.

Not because of how spiritual I am, mind you, but because I'm not interested in the discussion raging about a particular word in the *Summa*. And the crucifix is directly across from me on the wall. If I'm going to wander, I should probably pray or contemplate God or some such piety—it's what Aquinas would ask of me—so here I am. The little Jesus on the huge cross.

After class I mention this to my friend James, who has the misfortune of sitting right underneath the crucifix so he has nothing to contemplate during the seminar. He suggests that the enormity of the cross is to make sure Jesus can't get off.

It's an interesting suggestion. Did the Romans think about making the cross big enough? Were they afraid he might try to escape? Was anyone? Or did they all assume this would be an ordinary crucifixion, an execution just like all the others?

It's not as though the signs weren't there. A man who can raise the dead is someone to be curious about. Did they think they could build a cross big enough to contain Jesus? Did the makers of this crucifix? Do I?

Yes, I think sometimes I do believe I can construct a cross big enough to keep Jesus on it. It's a much more comfortable place to keep him. Not for him, I'm sure—for me, and only in my mind. Jesus is easier to deal with when he's nailed in place than

when he's walking around, resurrected and changing the world.

The resurrected Jesus asks me to follow him only God knows where. He asks me to trust, to give up control, and I don't much like it. I don't like not knowing where I'm headed, even if I know the person I'm following, even if I trust him.

Turns out, though, that I'm not very trusting, even of Jesus. I want to know where we're headed and to decide for myself that it's good for me to go there. So yes, it is easier to keep Jesus on that cross, to build it big enough and use nails strong enough so that when I turn my back he doesn't slip off into resurrection and beckon me to follow.

This, of course, is impossible. Jesus always slips off into resurrection. Good Friday always turns into Easter Sunday. It's our good news. And the first thing Jesus does when he appears to his disciples is to send them to work they know not where: "As the Father sent me, so I am sending you" (John 20:21). It doesn't matter how big I build my cross; Jesus refuses to stay there. He insists that I follow, even when I don't know where he's leading. He insists on this trust, this inability to control him.

Yet it is not a blind trust. My trust is grounded precisely in the fact that Jesus, for all of his ability to step off the cross whatever the size, didn't do it. Not until after he was dead. How hard must it have been to know he could step off if he wanted and instead choose to stay on? I once heard Sam Wells preach a Good Friday sermon where he said, "Jesus has a love that hangs on." I think of this now, staring at that strange crucifix. What else but love would keep Jesus on that cross?

It is love, then, that calls me to follow. And it is love that shrinks the cross, watches Jesus jump into the Easter dawn, and then takes a few feeble steps after him. Out of my head, out of the classroom, and into the world Christ loves. Following resurrection.