

One of the most amazing experiences of coming to know Jesus that I have heard is from Sara Miles in her book *Take this Bread*¹. She describes herself as a secular intellectual; a left-wing journalist with a habit of skepticism and one Sunday morning, she wandered into an Episcopal Church.

She writes. "I had no earthly reason to be there. I'd never heard a Gospel reading, never said the Lord's Prayer. I was certainly not interested in becoming a Christian—or, as I thought of it rather less politely, a religious nut. But on other long walks, I'd passed the beautiful wooden building, with its shingled steeples and plain windows, and this time I went in, on an impulse, with no more than a reporter's habitual curiosity.

I walked in, took a chair, and tried not to catch anyone's eye. There were windows looking out on a hillside covered in geraniums, and I could hear birds squabbling outside. ... There was no organ, no choir, no pulpit: just the unadorned voices of the people, and long silences framed by the ringing of deep Tibetan bowls. I sang, too. It crossed my mind that this was ridiculous. We sat down and stood up, sang and sat down, waited and listened and stood up and sang, and it was all pretty peaceful and sort of interesting. "Jesus invites everyone to his table," the woman announced, and we started moving up in a stately dance to the table in the rotunda. It had some dishes on it, and a pottery goblet.

And then we gathered around that table. And someone was putting a piece of fresh, crumbly bread in my hands, saying "the body of Christ," and handing me the goblet of sweet wine, saying "the blood of Christ," and then something outrageous and terrifying happened. Jesus happened to me.

Sara says she still can't explain my first communion. It made no sense. God, named "Christ" or "Jesus," was real, and in her mouth—utterly short-circuited her ability to do anything but cry.

I have read her story many times and it still speaks to me. The physical eating of bread is what brought her to Jesus and with Jesus she has remained. Her story reminds me how physical our practice of Christianity is. Think about all the ways we experience Jesus physically – in the receiving of the bread and wine, in gathering in the church, in lifting up our voices together in prayer, in sharing the peace, and in so many other ways. Part of why covid has been so devastating because so much of this physicality has been stripped away.

This physicality is at the heart of our belief because God physically sent his Son to live among us, to teach to heal and then to die on the cross. We see this physicality in our gospel today as Jesus appears to his disciples. It is not his words that are emphasized

¹ Miles, Sara. *Take This Bread* (pp. 58-59). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

but rather his how Jesus is with them. He invited them to look at his hands and his feet. They are invited to touch. A ghost would not have this flesh and bones. Jesus even asks for and eats a piece of fish.

As Debie Thomas² says, “Indeed, *all* of Jesus’s post-resurrection appearances in the Gospels center on the physical. Jesus doesn’t manifest as a disembodied voice that waxes eloquent on the philosophical implications of death and life. He shows up with hands and feet, scars and wounds.”

One of my stories of Jesus happening to me in a physical way is not as astonishing as Sara’s but it was still transforming in my life. This took place over time as I struggle with my belief and organized religion in my twenties. I was away from church and when I returned, I still had many questions and at times wasn’t sure why I was there. What connected me was the body and blood of Jesus – receiving that wafer and taking that sip of wine that we had prayed over and blessed as a community. Week after week, I showed up because I knew I was experiencing the sacred – Jesus, God and that was the foundation that tethered me to the community while my faith deepened over time.

In many ways, I would say that the past ten years in our experience together as rector and congregation Jesus has been happening to us. Jesus was there in that we did – in our worship, our study, our helping those in need, our coffee hours, our discussions, our laughter, our work days, our fellowship gatherings and in tough times like this pandemic. As imperfect as it can be, we Christians experience Jesus by physically being a part of community. Together we are connected to Christ.

And it is not about me. St. Peter’s has been experiencing Jesus for 336 years AND will continue to do so. Clergy leaders have joined in and will continue to be called here. I am so grateful to have been able to be part of it and I will take this particular experience of Jesus in this community with me as I go on to serve others.

But wait! There is more. This experience of Jesus is an amazing gift, but it comes with a declaration which Jesus gives the disciples – you will be witnesses of these things. It is because they were witnesses, that we have been given the experience of Jesus and we must do the same for others. We too must witness. We must share our experience of being a part of the St. Peter’s community where we Jesus happens to us. And while many of us rely on witnessing through our actions, we do need to use our words - whether they be written or spoken because there is much that happens here that cannot be seen.

Sara would not have experienced Jesus that day if she had not gone into that church. I would not have stayed connected to the experience of Jesus over time if I didn’t keep showing up at church when I was struggling with so many questions. People may see us leaving for church or know that we are part of a faith community, but if we don’t share our experiences, they will not know and they will be deprived of hearing how you experience Jesus physically today in this world.

² Debie Thomas, Journey with Jesus, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2982-embodied>

My friends, the past ten years of our ministry together has been filled with challenge and joy. At every turn, Jesus has happened in our lives. That doesn't stop with my leaving. You have been here for three centuries. You know how to do Jesus work. Continue to share, continue to reach out, continue to be a presence in the Perth Amboy community so that as Jesus continues to happen to you, you will offer to those you encounter the opportunity for Jesus to happen to them.