

On the day of her mother’s funeral, Caroline was stung by a bee. The courtyard of the family house was full of people.

In the infinity of her four years, between the shock of the pain and the welling up of tears, Caroline scanned the crowd urgently for her one sure source of comfort and then cut short her search, having learned at a stroke the meaning of absence and death.

The scene, which only lasted a few seconds, was the most poignant a friend had ever observed. There comes a moment for all of us when a knowledge past consoling enters our soul and rends it. For Peter that moment was his betrayal of Jesus.

All four Gospels report that, on the night he was betrayed, Jesus prophesied that his disciples would abandon him in his hour of crisis. Peter protested, assuring Jesus that, even if the courage of all the others failed, he, Peter, would remain loyal. Jesus predicted that that very night, before the cock crowed, Peter would deny him three times.

According to the Gospel of John, the night in which Jesus was examined in the house of the high priest was cold, and so the various servants and officials waiting outside in the courtyard lit a fire of coals and stood around it to warm themselves.

Peter, like the other disciples, had fled the scene; but, Peter, unlike the other disciples, turned back from his flight and approached the high priest’s courtyard. While Peter stood among the others, also to escape the chill, he was asked three times if he was one of Jesus’ disciples, and on each occasion denied that he was.

Peter did not, obviously, have an opportunity therefore to speak to Jesus before the latter’s death—to confess his failure, to seek forgiveness, to pledge himself anew to his master. Within the realm of normal human possibilities, there was no way for Peter to undo what he had done. Peter went apart and wept bitterly.

In the days when the Gospels were written, the tears of a common man were not deemed worthy of attention. They would have been treated by most writers, if at all, as an occasion for mirth. Only the grief of the noble could be tragic, or sublime or even fully human.

The tears of Peter were therefore indicative of a profound shift in moral imagination and sensibility. Something had become visible that had formerly been hidden from sight.

For Christian thought, God had chosen to reveal himself among the least of men and women, and to exalt them to the dignity of his own sons and daughters. And, as a

consequence, a new vision of the dignity of every soul had entered the consciousness of the Gentile world.

Going to the graveyard to visit a person one has loved is a strange experience. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women, find not the body of a person they loved, but two messengers asking them why they are looking for the living among the dead.

According to Luke, the disciples thought the women were nuts. The word translated as “idle tale” literally means “delirious.” They did not believe the women. Only Peter decided to check out the story for himself. He runs. Does he dare hope his betrayal is not the last word on his relationship with Jesus? Peter looked into the tomb, saw burial cloths discarded and went home, amazed at what had happened.

But what had happened? Considered purely as a historical phenomenon, the abrupt transition of Jesus’ followers from a posture of utter defeat and disillusionment to one of triumphant jubilee constitutes an altogether impenetrable enigma. Other Messianic sects had perished, and there was no reason to expect that the cult of Jesus would not soon vanish as well.

After all, the apostles were not just purveyors of a spiritual philosophy, who were merely continuing their master’s teaching. The Easter proclamation was of an altogether different nature. And, given their persistence over many years in making that proclamation, and their willingness in many cases to give their lives rather than repudiate it, one may confidently say that it is an event that has no parallel.

The most responsible historical judgment on this episode is that a profound shared experience transformed the disciples’ understanding of the life and death of their master, and of his presence within time, and of the point and purpose of their own lives. Something quite extraordinary and unprecedented had clearly taken place.

Peter went home, amazed at what had happened. Going home sounds like an odd response to an extraordinary and unprecedented event, until one remembers who is telling the story. Luke’s skilled use of the Greek *πρός ἑαυτόν* suggests both a literal and figurative sense: Peter “went home”; Peter came “to himself.”

Peter was amazed that the last word on his life was not a word of judgement. The Gospel’s final word given at Easter is the possibility of seemingly impossible reconciliation, the healing of wounds that normally could never be healed, and the hope of beginning anew precisely when all hope would seem to have been extinguished.

Just as the prodigal son came to himself and went home to a waiting father so Peter, the prodigal brother, comes to himself and goes home to a waiting friend.