There is a lot more to a vocation than choosing—or, for that matter, being called to—a particular way of life. The reason is that vocation is not something static. The outward form of a person’s life, say, in terms of consecrated life or ordained ministry, and the signs that accompany those forms such as a religious habit or clerical collar, may not change all that much over time. But vocation goes much deeper, as engagement with the mystery of God shapes and reshapes us, endlessly. I know we sometimes speak of marriage in vocational terms, and people might refer to their life as a teacher, a physician, a politician, or a social worker in terms of a calling. And that makes perfect sense. Insofar as any Christian is being guided by the Spirit, the “calling” one discerns in terms of work and state of life might be characterized as “religious.”

But there is a more restricted sense of vocation that has to do with the experience of God’s pressing a claim against one’s life. This claim not only cannot be brushed aside; it also leaves an indelible mark upon the individual’s existence, whether or not the person ultimately chooses to live out that claim in consecrated life or ordained ministry. Jacob may have wrestled with an angel for just a single night before being given the name “Israel,” but most of us will probably spend our whole lives contending with God in one way or another, and like Jacob be bruised for life (see Genesis 32:22-32). It is that divine claim upon a person, not only to do something but also to be a particular kind of human being, which makes vocation so dynamic a reality.
Discerning the will of God in the matter of vocation is seldom easy, and here the various gospel accounts may be a bit misleading. Jesus “found” Simon and Andrew, James and John, Nathanel, Philip and the others, and invited them to join him. “At once they left their nets and followed him” (Mark 1:18). Or again: “and Levi got up, left everything and followed him” (Luke 5:28). And further, “So they went and saw where he was staying, and spent that day with him” (John 1:39). The details, so abbreviated yet so charged with pristine remembrance, play on our imaginations. “At once they left their nets” and “they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men” (Mark 1:18, 20). When the call to discipleship is clearly spoken, the message seems to be, generous and zealous hearts ought to respond without the least hesitation.

In real life, however, a lot of discerning has to take place before one sets out on the road with Jesus. No one would start to build a tower without serious forethought, lest people wind up saying, “This fellow began to build and was not able to finish” (Luke 14:30). But while the initial discernment might indeed put someone on the way with Jesus, there are going to be many times along the road when the person is going to wonder what in the world she or he has gotten herself—or himself—into. Callings do not merely unfold laterally, like routes along a map; they also unfold vertically, pushing constantly deeper into the uncharted territory of a person’s mind and soul.

Gospel figures as aspects of Christian experience

Most of us have long since recognized that the figures of Martha and Mary represent very inadequately the difference between active and contemplative communities, but those two sisters might very well represent two poles of Christian religious experience. That is to say, each of is at one and the
same time both Martha and Mary; we identify with both women—the one sister who opened her house to Jesus and the other sister who sat at his feet and listened. Jesus does indeed tell the “Martha” in us that “Mary” has chosen the better part (Luke 10:42), but in doing so Jesus has simply drawn attention to the priority of our union with God no matter whatever else we do in life.

Yet how long does it take us to learn this lesson? How many times in the course of a month or a year do our spirits swing back and forth between these two poles? Our hands, after all, were not given to us to sit on, or even to keep permanently folded in prayer. Martha and Mary may be distinct literary personalities, but the gospel reader recognizes both of them within his or her life. I would suggest that, in much the same way, many of the figures who appear in the gospel narratives coexist inside of us. Their actions and reactions, their inner thoughts and spoken words, are frequently things we have heard or noticed before inside our own minds.

**Invitations declined**

Our imaginations gravitate so automatically toward the call stories in the gospels whenever we think about vocation that we might not spend much time reflecting on the individuals who decided not to follow Jesus. Moreover, we may have grown so accustomed to hearing Jesus call individuals to discipleship that we cannot imagine him not allowing someone to follow him who desperately wanted to. Several scenes come to mind.

The first passage I think of appears in John’s Gospel. After the discourse on the bread of life, John recalls many disciples saying, “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?” (John 6:60) As a result, “From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him” (John 6:66). It is interesting
that this collapse of discipleship and perhaps of vocational awareness was apparently occasioned by an inability to grasp the Eucharistic mystery.

But the story of an invitation declined that stands out would have to be the moment when someone youthful and rich approached Jesus (Mark says he ran up to him) looking for guidance. Jesus counseled him, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (Matt 19:21). The price was more than the young man had the spiritual freedom to pay, and so “he went away sad.” The young man was torn between a genuine desire to accept the invitation and follow Jesus, and an attachment to property and his family name—“he had great wealth.” He would be losing whatever made him special and set him apart from everybody else. He would have been aligning himself with a lower class where everybody looked and spoke the same. He is sad (the Gospel’s word here means “sorrowful,” “grieving,” “with deep regret”), not so much because he cannot part with his goods but because Jesus’ invitation exposed a certain hollowness in his relationship with God. Maybe the young man is saddened because he realized he was losing something he had long wanted, just as he was about to find it.

The second story that comes to mind is that of the demon-possessed man of Gerasa, the monster of the hills and tombs who kept everyone terrified. Once the demons were driven out we find the man sitting at Jesus’ feet—the position of a disciple—clothed and in his right mind. “The man from whom the demons had gone out begged to go with him, but Jesus sent him away, saying, ‘Return home and tell how much God has done for you’.” (Luke 8:38-39) Mark tells us that he did more
than simply go back home: “So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him” (Mark 5:20). And the Decapolis appears to be a rather extensive piece of territory when you look at it on a biblical map!

Thus we have two individuals and two stories. One is about a person who was called to discipleship but declined the invitation, and the other is about someone who took the posture of a disciple, who really wanted to stay with Jesus but was sent away. The fact that the man with the demons was a gentile may account for why Jesus would not let him be a disciple, but for most of us being non-Jewish would be beside the point. The earnestness of his desire to stay with Jesus is underscored by the striking way in which he showed his thanks and obeyed Jesus’ instruction. Nevertheless, he was not permitted to travel in Jesus’ company.

**How do the stories end?**

Now the gospels do not tell us what happened next; they leave that to our imaginations. Did the rich man, despite his evident moral and religious goodness—Jesus, after all, “looked at him and loved him” (Mark 10:21)—eventually get over his sadness and forget about Jesus, or did he spend the rest of his life wondering how his life would have turned out if he had done exactly what Jesus suggested? Did he wind up torn between what was good and what was better?

And did the man from Gerasa, liberated from his uncleanness and those terrifying demons, eventually conclude that he had said enough about how much Jesus had done for him? Did he ever see his deliverer again? Did he come to think that some residue of his former madness and contagion must have made him permanently unworthy to share Jesus’ fellowship? Or did he ultimately discover mission and identity
in bearing witness to Jesus, buoyed by a gratitude and a freedom so immense that his one encounter lasted him a lifetime? Was his testimony so effective that by the time Jesus reached the region of the Decapolis there were already four thousand people prepared to spend three days listening to Jesus, the Jewish prophet from Galilee, without anything to eat? The evangelist does not satisfy our curiosity, but his text teases our imagination. For although the man disappears from our view in Mark 5:20, his life and his story obviously went on. The same seems to hold true for the wealthy young man, but maybe at least for the evangelist the unnamed man’s leaving “the way” was not the story’s true ending. The encounter with Jesus may have left his soul bruised; the wrestling would continue.

Commenting on Mark’s Gospel, the New Testament scholar Bas M.F. van Iersel has suggested that there may be a literary connection between the young man clothed in a white robe who interprets for the women what the empty tomb means (Mark 16:5) and the young man in the passion story who dropped the linen garment that covered him and fled from the garden naked (Mark 14:51-52). The two young men might in fact be the same figure and, if so, that figure could well be the evangelist himself, painted into the gospel narrative—not as an historical eyewitness but as a faith-witness. The one who drops the garment in the garden and runs away in disgrace could symbolize the Christian who, in face of persecution, “drops” his or her baptismal commitment. And the young man inside the tomb would symbolize the person whose faith has been recovered—once again clad in white and announcing with conviction that Jesus of Nazareth is not to be found among the dead, but among the living.
Van Iersel went on to link the young men in these two episodes with the demon-possessed character of Gerasa who lived among the tombs and roamed the countryside naked, but the rich young man strikes me as a more promising candidate for the one who would join Jesus, lose his nerve at the moment of crisis, and recover it when he later relived the memory of how Jesus had loved him. If we are on the right track here, then the rich young man—at least in the reader’s imagination—does indeed return to the story. Three figures become one. Someone was called to discipleship, turned away grieved, found his way back, abandoned Jesus with the others, and in the end became an Easter witness. Each stage of the journey would represent another moment in the unfolding of a call, a spiritual “week,” a further stage in the evolution of a vocation.

The point here is to realize that in contemplating passages like these we connect with and even become many of the characters in the gospels. They live inside of us, continually advancing and receding as our faith-life matures. Distinct as characters in the narrative, they help us to become aware of the many different forces, both internal and external, which stretch and test us. We know what it is like to run up to Jesus, full of enthusiasm and looking for what will satisfy the longing of our hearts. We know what it is like to walk away because our hearts may not be ready for the answer and the invitation that Jesus gives. But the longing, the sense of being called to make something more out of life, does not dissolve when we walk away; we shall always be wanting to find our way back. Still, the return can be unsteady; for it is one thing to make a decision and another to live with its implications. The young man who ran away naked was no exception; the rest of the disciples ran for cover as well. They may have kept their clothes on, but they had dishonored themselves just the same. The end of the story
reveals a Jesus who virtually calls his companions a second time. Thus the one who fled has now become our Easter witness.

In one way or another, perhaps many vocations follow a similar pattern. Between the moment when one is first called and the moment when one’s whole life turns into a testimony to the memorial acclamation “Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again” there stands a process, a journey, the great unfolding. Sometimes it may seem that we are the rich man who walked away, the young man who fled, and the figure seated in the empty tomb—all at the same time. Not only that. We might even feel like the one who wanted to remain with Jesus but was told he could not. Yet in some sense that character refused to take no for an answer; for while he could not remain with Jesus, he took the memory of Jesus with him, sharing that remembrance with all who would listen. There can well be a vocational season when a person wants to be with Jesus but feels that Jesus will not allow it, at least not on the terms she or he was anticipating. Being with Jesus does not necessarily mean accompanying him physically in Galilee, of course. But learning to let go of what seems to be such a wholesome and holy desire—sailing off with Jesus—is an important lesson. Living alongside Jesus physically, much like the urge of many Christians to spend their lives in the Holy Land, is not an end in itself. Mission and testimony seem to matter more in God’s plan.

We never outgrow the gospels. That sounds like such an obvious statement that it scarcely deserves to be said. But the gospel narrative is a little deceiving because it flows so easily like a history of Jesus’ ministry; we read and listen to it in a linear fashion. But the gospels also read us, over and over again.
A person tires of the familiar scenes and images and starts searching for some other source of spiritual nourishment only when the vocational journey stalls. One may seem to have outgrown praying with the imagination. We can become temporarily frozen, isolating one character—one moment or “week” of the gospel story—from all the rest. The result is that we are no longer capable of feeling the overall rhythm of our lives or of God’s engagement with the world.

Yet insofar as the remembrance of being called takes over our hearts and minds, we are not going to remain stuck for very long. The Spirit will not allow that to happen. All of us know how alienation feels, but we also know the feeling of being invited and being sent. We know what it’s like to walk away sad, but we also know that walking away only makes the sadness worse. We know, too, what it’s like to be an Easter witness, reinterpreting the empty tomb—the emptiness and bewilderment so many people experience at one time or another—by pointing to the real presence of the risen Lord in everyday life. These moments come and go within us; such are the mysterious seasons of vocation.

[2004]