

**“The Road to Emmaus: A Spiritual Journey Back to the Jerusalem of Faith”**  
**Homily for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Easter, Year “A”**  
**St. Mary’s Cathedral**  
**April 26, 2020**

**Introduction**

In this third Sunday of Easter, we are coming toward the end of this first half of the Easter season, when the Sunday Gospel readings recount for us various occasions when our Lord appeared to his disciples after his Resurrection. Each of these accounts has its own particular elements. This Sunday’s story of our Lord’s appearance to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus is unique: it does not appear in any of the other Gospels, other than a passing reference to it in the Gospel of St. Mark. And yet the story is consistent with all of the other post-Resurrection accounts in certain elements. Most common of all is the element of disbelief.

Last Sunday we heard the story of the doubting Thomas: Thomas was not there with the other apostles the first time our Lord appeared to them after the Resurrection, but Thomas is there the second time. Thomas does not come to believe until he actually encounters the risen Lord. But in point of fact, all of the disciples doubted, all of them were slow to believe, even after seeing the Lord in his resurrected state.

**The Emmaus Process: From Gathered to Dispersed to Gathered Again**

We see the same thing here. Recall the words of our Lord to the two disciples as he walked with them on the way: “Oh, how foolish you are! How slow of heart to believe all that the prophets spoke!”

But before we pass too harsh of a judgment on those first followers of our Lord, let us consider for a moment the situation they were in. They were a small band of disciples, gathered around their teacher, with great hopes of what he would accomplish for them. Recall the words of the two disciples when our Lord asks them about what things were going on in Jerusalem: “...we were hoping that he would be the one to redeem Israel.” Then, they saw him condemned and brutally executed. They did stay around for a while, for the execution happened on Friday afternoon and today’s story happened on the following Sunday afternoon. And even though they heard the first reports that he was actually alive, come back from the dead, they did not believe, and so what happens? They begin to disperse. They had been assembled around him in hope, and now their disbelief causes them to disperse.

So now we see our risen Lord intervening into the situation, and what does he do? As St. Luke tells us: “...beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them what referred to him in all the Scriptures.” Jesus leads them from disbelief to faith, and the journey to faith is complete at the breaking of the bread. This is clearly a reference to the ritual of the Eucharist, for our Lord carries out the same ritual actions here as at the Last Supper: “...he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them.” Their journey to faith is complete when they recognize the Real Presence of their Lord in the Eucharistic celebration. And then what do they do? “[T]hey set out at once and returned to Jerusalem.” In other words, by bringing his disciples to faith, our Lord reassembles the community of his disciples who had been dispersed because of their unbelief.

### **What It Means for Us**

This Gospel story contains many lessons for us now at this time of sheltering in place. First of all, notice the process that our Lord takes with these two disciples: first he expounds upon all that is written of him in the word of God, and then he sits down at table to share a meal with them, an action that is clearly Eucharistic in its elements. It is a movement from the proclamation of the word, to the celebration of the sacrament of his presence. This is exactly what takes place at every Mass. Jesus was establishing for them the pattern that every act of worship in which the community of his disciples assembles to celebrate his saving death and Resurrection would take until he returns at the end of time: the proclamation of the Word, and then the Word becoming flesh in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

During these days of sheltering in place, we cannot assemble as we normally would for worship. We are, in fact, dispersed, but not because of unbelief, but rather because of circumstances beyond our control, doing our part to support our civic leaders in stemming the spread of the coronavirus. But we do not have to be dispersed spiritually. In fact, we must be careful that the reverse process does not happen to us. For those first disciples, their disbelief led them to be dispersed; for us, being dispersed must not lead to disbelief.

We can avoid this when we remain spiritually present to each other, especially in prayer and worship. That is why it is so important that you are following Mass through livestreaming, and that you actually join in the ritual of worship through active participation, as if you were physically present in church. Watching the Mass casually as if it were any other TV show is *not* spiritual presence; it leads to spiritual dispersing, which can in turn begin to destroy faith. You might say that the need for social distancing must not result in spiritual distancing. That is not the way of our Lord, for he continues to be really present to us in the Blessed Sacrament on the altar, and he knows your sadness at not being able to be physically present to the celebration of the sacrament.

He is still present to us in the Eucharist, so even if you cannot receive him in person, sacramentally, you can still receive him in your heart. As you follow the Mass remotely, when the time of Communion comes, make yourself conscious of your desire to receive him, a desire he already knows and recognizes; and then, recognize his presence and invite him into your heart, making an act of spiritual communion. This is very pleasing to him!

### **Tell the Good News**

There is one more detail in the story of Emmaus that should not escape our attention. Why did the two disciples return to Jerusalem? What did they do when they arrived there? They “recounted what had taken place on the way and how [Jesus] was made known to them in the breaking of bread.”

When they came to complete faith, the full realization that their Lord had indeed risen from the dead and conquered death, and that that was really him in their presence, they were so brimming over with joy that they could not but return to the community of disciples and share the good news. Is that not always what it is like when you are filled with joy at good news? When you are awarded the most valuable player recognition in your sports league when no one thought you could compete equally to the rest, when you apply yourself with great diligence to

your studies and earn the distinction of valedictorian at your graduation, when a young man proposes marriage to his hoped-for bride-to-be and she accepts, in any situation like this, don't you want to just go out and tell the whole world how happy you are? It is a natural movement of the human spirit, and this was the supernatural fire of the Holy Spirit which characterized those first disciples after they came to the fullness of faith, and encountered and came to know personally, in their heart and mind, in the very depths of their being, their risen Lord.

Although we cannot assemble as we usually do for worship, for prayer, for learning the faith and any type of fellowship, we can still find ways to evangelize in the restricted circumstances in which we find ourselves. We can find ways to show the goodness of the Gospel to those in our household through small, everyday courtesies. And we can bear witness to a faith-filled, hope-filled, Gospel-inspired Christian life by simple acts of charity in those limited circumstances outside of the home in which we may find ourselves at times. Going out of your way to show an act of kindness to a needy neighbor who may be especially vulnerable to illness, showing appreciation to healthcare workers and others who are engaged in essential services, helping a distressed neighbor or relative who is struggling to balance the demands of work with caring for children staying at home – these are just a few examples of the unique opportunities our present situation affords us to shine the light of the Gospel in what for many is a dark and distressing time.

### **Conclusion**

Every time of crisis, every moment of distress, is an opportunity God gives us for spiritual greatness. The present time is certainly no exception. Indeed, the display of Christian virtues will shine all the more brilliantly at a time such as this, for light is most illuminating when it is cast into a dark room. Let us, then, be attentive to these unique opportunities to grow in holiness by living those Christian virtues through which the light of the Gospel will shine on the path that leads to the encounter with the risen and saving Lord, who conquers all sadness, sin and death once for all.