**3rd Sunday of Easter**  
Cycle B, 4.15.18  

**JESUS’ LAST & BEST GIFT TO US**

I wasn’t very familiar with the Washington Post, having lived on the West Coast for so many years, but a couple years ago I found a new allegiance to that newspaper. I was in Washington, D.C. visiting the Oblate seminary residence there. Each morning after we shared Morning Prayer or Mass, I joined the six other Oblates for breakfast before the theology students left for classes at Catholic University. The newspaper was spread out over the table as each guy grabbed a different section. The very first article I read shocked me because of its emotional depth, compassionate sensitivity and unabashed Catholic insight. The article was written by Tracy Grant, a deputy managing editor at the Washington Post. In the article she told her story about becoming her husband’s faithful caregiver after he was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer. Over the course of seven months, her husband Bill, as she described it, "went from beating me silly at tennis to needing my help to go to the bathroom." It was a difficult, stressful and exhausting time, but Tracy writes that those seven months were the time in her life when she felt "most alive."

Her writing moved me to tears that morning and inspired my faith. She wrote: *I was 42 years old. I had become a respected professional, a responsible and, I hope, loving parent. But I had to discover the reason I was on this earth. During those seven months, I came to understand that whatever else I did in my life, nothing mattered more. I discovered that the petty grievances of an irksome coworker, a child with the sniffles, or a flat tire pales in comparison with the beauty of spontaneous laughter, the night sky, the smells of a bakery. There were moments of joy, laughter, and tenderness everyday - if I was willing to look hard enough. I found I could train myself to set my internal barometer to be more compassionate than callous."

"In the days following Bill’s diagnosis and brain surgery, being his caregiver required me to be the best reporter I knew how to be. I found clinical trials and talked to oncologists in Texas, Pennsylvania, and New York. It gave me a sense of purpose, and it gave Bill comfort - and a few chuckles - to overhear me reading the riot act to some insurance rep who'd told me a treatment wouldn’t be covered." And now, years after Bill's death, Tracy looks at those last seven months and can write about them with gratitude. When it became hard for her husband Bill to navigate the stairs, he slept on the family room sofa and she slept on the floor next to him, at the ready if he needed help getting to the bathroom in the middle of the night. She said it was reminiscent of having preemie twins and never sleeping more than a few hours at a stretch. With her boys, she prayed for the day she would no longer have to tend to them in the wee hours. With her husband Bill, she prayed for another month, another week, another day of being able to have him to care for.
What really surprised me as I read the article were not only her frankness about her love and her emotions – topics we don’t often read about it any secular newspaper – but also her open admission about her Catholic faith and how important it was to her. She said: *When I couldn’t sleep during those nights, I took to praying the rosary and then began praying it daily even if I had no difficulty sleeping. There is a reason that prayer beads are common in so many religious traditions dating to well before Christ.*

> For me the repetition of the Hail Mary while caressing pearlescent beads helped slow my breathing, calm my mind. I came to feel naked if I didn’t have beads in a pocket or a purse, within easy reach while scans were performed, IVs dripped, test results were waited for.

> Even during the moments when I was most angry with God, I found that I could talk to Mary on the theory that she knew a little bit about being challenged by God. Today, saying the rosary is part of my morning ritual, done while walking the dog and bearing witness to the moment when night relinquishes its purchase to a new day.

In the Easter gospels that we hear during these Great Fifty Days, Jesus goes to great lengths to show his disciples that he is real. He shared a meal with the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Today he asked for some food and he ate a piece of fish before them so they could understand that his presence is real, not a phantom or a figment of their imaginations. And, more importantly, he showed them his hands and his side – the place of his wounds. The Resurrection doesn’t ignore the reality of life with all its pain and sorrow. Our God suffers with us in our struggles. One writer refers to “our disabled God” and asks: *What would it be like for us to follow in the footsteps of a disabled God? What would it be like to lead with our scars, instead of enslaving ourselves to society’s expectations of piety and prettiness? Jesus proved that he was alive and approachable by risking real engagement. Real presence. “Here is how you can recognize me. By my hands and my feet. See? I have scars. I have baggage. I have history. I am alive to pain, just as you are. I am not immune; I am real.”*

> Near the end of World War II a small scrap of paper was smuggled out of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Nazi prison cell. He was a courageous German Lutheran pastor who had been imprisoned for his participation in
Wherever and whenever true love is present, resurrection is experienced. Tracy experienced that sense of resurrection in her caring for her husband - and it changed her in profound and beautiful ways. And, whether she realized it or not, her loving generosity was a "witness" to the possibilities for such resurrection in her life and the lives of those she loves. In the compassion and peace we’re able to extend to those we love and who love us, we become "flesh and bone" signs of the hope and grace of Easter along the Emmaus roads we all walk.

The writer of that Washington Post article concluded with these words: "I haven’t started a foundation to cure cancer. I haven't left the news business to get a medical degree. I work. I try to be there for my sons. I will never again have that high a purpose. But every day, I try again to be the person I became during those seven months. I try to be a little less judgmental, a little more forgiving and generous, a little more grateful for the small moments in my life. I am a better person for having been Bill's caregiver. It was his last, best gift to me."

The last and best gift of Our Risen Lord is the hope he gave us that love conquers all things, even death itself. As we recognize the Risen Lord in the breaking of

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"Only the suffering God can help."

— Dietrich Bonhoeffer —

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