

Third Sunday of Easter

The two disciples recounted what had taken place on the way,
and how Jesus was made known to them
in the breaking of bread.

While they were still speaking about this,
he stood in their midst and said to them,
"Peace be with you."
But they were startled and terrified
and thought that they were seeing a ghost.
Then he said to them, "Why are you troubled?
And why do questions arise in your hearts?
Look at my hands and my feet, that it is I myself.
Touch me and see, because a ghost does not have flesh and bones
as you can see I have."
And as he said this,
he showed them his hands and his feet.
While they were still incredulous for joy and were amazed,
he asked them, "Have you anything here to eat?"
They gave him a piece of baked fish;
he took it and ate it in front of them.

He said to them,
"These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you,
that everything written about me in the law of Moses
and in the prophets and psalms must be fulfilled."
Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.
And he said to them,
"Thus it is written that the Christ would suffer
and rise from the dead on the third day
and that repentance, for the forgiveness of sins,
would be preached in his name
to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.
You are witnesses of these things."

Lk 24:35-48

Strange question: Have you ever been to the Grand Canyon? If not, you must go! With all the danger of sounding painfully obvious, I assure you it's worth the trip. The views are spectacular, the vastness is amazing: you stand there, staring at the magnificence of nature, and it's very hard to stop. For me, the most impressive part is the geology. Water flowing through the canyon has unveiled to us layers upon layers of geological levels that document the time of their creation. You feel like you are participating in the millions of years of the history of our planet, condensed in the majestic face of the rock. Every one of those layers has seen millions of sunrises and sunsets, millions of changes of seasons. They were there when humans appeared and have been present throughout the whole history of our culture. Their very presence tells you the story and invites you to know more.

"You are witnesses of these things."

When Jesus says these words to the apostles, he foretells the life of the Church. The life he speaks of cannot be summarized by a historical book. It cannot be depicted by any shining cultural achievement or any embarrassing moral scandal. It cannot be understood by analysis of the governance of popes and bishops or the change of the lifestyles among the nations. Jesus means the real life of the Church. He means endless conversions and endless failings of every Christian that ever lived. He means great inspirations and great dilemmas of everyone who ever followed his voice. He means prayers raised to God with hope and with pain. He means lives lived quietly and lives offered dramatically for the truth of the Gospel. He also means those countless quiet stories of faith that we will never learn about from any history book or any connection to a political event, the lives that are hidden like deeply buried gems in the great mountains, maybe to be discovered by some persistent miners or accidentally revealed during some tectonic change or maybe just laying there for the enjoyment of the Creator.

“You are witnesses to these things.”

Christian witness is not really what we say or what we do. Christian witness is how profoundly the words of the Gospel, the grace of the Spirit, and the presence of the Father transform our very nature, radiating through our words and actions. Christian witness is daily faithfulness and longing, persistent hope that restores the very fabric of our lives. We are witnesses to the Gospel because — despite our sins, despite our confusion, and despite all possible imperfections — when we truly follow our longing for the Risen Lord, it becomes a solid foundation for our life and for the life of the planet. Our longing, when it is united with the longings of all of the disciples of Christ, becomes the life of the Church.

It's been already a month since the women found an empty tomb. A lot of people tell me that they met him. Looks like he is close, although different than when we first met. Would I recognize him?

Mary, his dear friend, confused him with a gardener. The two disciples on the way to Emmaus were so disappointed, they couldn't even see him walking next to him for the whole day. His closest apostles Peter and John needed to see the lake and the fish to be struck by an unexpected observation, "It is the Lord." And finally, the most ridiculous, although the most obvious: "Is he a ghost?"

I need to ask myself if I will be able to recognize him. I know that the image of an old man who is nice and loving but will justly judge me somewhere in the yellow race of eternity, that image that I learned in the kindergarten, will not be very helpful. I know also that the cheesy quilt I made in my heart out of my wishful thinking and naive emotions doesn't really portray him very well. It says more about me than about him. How about the dark picture, the one I am afraid of? The negative projection of my terrified sins that I am hesitating to admit but I still protect in my heart and I still use it to terrorize myself. I know it is wrong, although I persistently keep it in me.

How about the intellect? I read so many books about him. I listened to so many lectures, good and bad. Will they help me when he comes in his risen beauty? Will I recognize him when he stands next to me?

Maybe my emotions. The disciples on the way to Emmaus testify that their heart was burning when he spoke to them. Will my heart be burning when I meet him? Or is it already too confused by my desires and longings, by all the artificial impulses of emotional lies that I keep walking into, and at the end keep producing just to somehow feel better?

Will I be able to find the honesty of Thomas and touch his wounds? Will I be able to be pure like the apostles on the way to Emmaus, and be excited about the words of the scripture that portray him? Will I finally be able to cry with Mary Magdalen when I cannot find him?

To my great astonishment, he offers me the answer that helps my emotions and my intellect, that liberates me from my fear and my delusional dreams, and I want to repeat after him: Lord, you are the good shepherd. You lay down your life for me. You are not a hired man. You don't run away.

You are the Good Shepherd, and you know me, and because of that, despite all my confusions, I know you.