

Third Sunday of Easter / Year A / April 26, 2020 (Fr. Giese)

We celebrated Easter Sunday two weeks ago but the gospel passage for today describes events that took place on that first Easter day, the day of Jesus' resurrection. As we heard, two of Jesus' disciples were leaving Jerusalem and making their way to a village called Emmaus. We don't know much about them. Only one of them, Cleopas, is named.

What we know for certain was that they were downcast, as the gospel says. I think it is reasonable to assume that the reason they were downcast was because they had come to Jerusalem with Jesus as part of the group who had accompanied him and were there for his joyful entry into the city when the crowds hailed his arrival. But then it had all turned bad, quickly. Jesus was arrested at night, put through a mock trial and taken before Pilate the next day. Pilate questioned him, had him scourged and then sent him away to be crucified to mollify the crowd which was yelling for Jesus' to be crucified. The crowd was in danger of getting out of control so Pilate gave him over to be crucified. Jesus is beaten so badly and tortured so severely, however, that he didn't last long on the cross. He died and his body was put in a tomb nearby.

When the gospel accounts catch up with Cleopas and the other disciple, they are leaving Jerusalem; leaving defeated, crushed, downcast, bewildered, and confused. They have no reason to stick around and every reason to leave, even after hearing the story of the women who had gone to the tomb and then reported a vision of angels who said Jesus was alive.

So, there they were, walking down the road to Emmaus, brokenhearted and downcast, and then Jesus joins them although they do not recognize him. While they walk Jesus explains the Scriptures to them and why the Messiah had to suffer and die for a new covenant with humanity to be inaugurated, one sealed in the blood of the Messiah. In the evening Jesus joined them for their meal but then took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. At that moment they recognized him, understood that he had been raised, and then everything changed for them. Everything. If they had left Jerusalem downcast and defeated and dragging their feet they returned there that same night with eagerness, joy, and with good news to share with apostles. What they thought had been defeat turned out to be a greater victory than they could have ever imagined when that day began. If they been discouraged before on the road, they were

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full of the encouragement they had from the time they spent with Jesus, encouragement they had received and encouragement they had to share.

This is important for us to think about at a time like this. We too are disciples of Jesus Christ and children of God. We need encouragement and we need to give encouragement and the experience of Cleopas and the other disciple shows us that it is part of our faith in God. So what do we learn from them, from their experience?

We learn, first of all, that Jesus is Emmanuel, God-with-us. Like Cleopas and the other disciple with him, we may not recognize the presence of Jesus but we know, like they did, in our hearts that he is with us because he loves us, he died for us, and according to his promise is with us unto the end of time. He has not left us orphaned. We are not on our own. Jesus is with us. That is one of the gifts of our faith in him and it makes a huge difference going through life and not just in the lives of saints but in our lives too, especially at moments of trial and difficulty, or moments of grief and need. Jesus is with us.

The Christian, as a disciple of Jesus does more than try to model his or her life on Jesus and follow his teaching and commandments. The disciple of Jesus walks with Jesus through life with Jesus as shepherd, as guide, and as friend. A short but powerful prayer to begin each day is simply this: "Jesus, let me walk with you this day." And the Christian who asks to walk with Jesus will never be alone. Cleopas and the other disciple came to a greater understanding and belief through the scriptures which Jesus explained to them on the road. They will do the same to us as they reveal the mind and heart of God. In Romans 15 St. Paul reminded the early Christians of Rome that, "...what was written previously was written for our instruction, that by endurance and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope." We too need to use them to come to know more God personally, as Saint Paul did, as the God of 'endurance and encouragement' and not only for ourselves and our own needs but to be able to share those gifts with others.

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Finally, Cleopas and his friend, recognized Jesus when he took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to them. This is the language of the early Church for the Lord's supper, the Eucharist. Jesus not only walks with us, he feeds us, with his body and blood to nourish us with his divine presence and divine life so that we might have life, true life, too.

If your hearts are burning within you, if your heart is hungering for union with him, you will be nourished and from that communion with him you will draw strength to live life to the full, to be faithful in all circumstances, and to face the world and not be overcome.