

## Third Sunday of Easter

April 26, 2020 St. Augustine Cathedral 10:00 a.m. Live Streaming

This is the last Sunday of April, the Third Sunday of Easter, and the 34<sup>th</sup> day of the Executive Order to “Stay Home-Stay Safe” during this incredible world-wide pandemic. But according to the Gospel Reading we just listened to, which is one of my most favorite passages, St. Luke tells us that it is “*that very day, the first day of the week*”, ---- it’s Easter!

In recounting the initial reactions of all the eye-witnesses on that first Easter, including Mary Magdalene, the holy women who found the Empty Tomb, and the Apostles who ran to verify that Jesus’ Body was missing, all the Evangelists tell us that they were confused---afraid---angry that His Body must have been stolen----and sad. In last Sunday’s Gospel, which spanned a week’s time, the Apostles were skeptical, even when the Risen Jesus passed thru the locked doors and assured them that it was really Him by pointing to the wounds in His hands and side; and the doors stayed locked, and their hearts remained skeptical, until Jesus came back the following week. That’s when they finally began to move from fear to faith. And in today’s Gospel, which also takes place on that first Easter Sunday afternoon, the two Disciples trudging back to their home town of Emmaus, were disheartened, discouraged, and dejected.

What’s **missing** from all of these initial appearances of the Risen Jesus is Joy---Excitement---Alleluia’s! The thought that anyone who was dead, and buried for 3 days, could actually be Alive---and not just alive, but FULL of Life--- was just beyond human comprehension. They needed time, and they needed Jesus to re-ignite the Flame of Faith in their hearts.

And that’s why for me, today’s Gospel passage is so powerful. It’s real, and something we can all relate to. St. Luke tells us that the two disciples, only one of whom is named (Cleopas), and both of whom had clearly been followers of Jesus for a fairly long time, were now leaving Jerusalem literally “heart-broken. The One, Whom they hoped was the Messiah, the One for Whom all of Israel had been waiting for generations, had been brutally killed and buried. The great adventure that they had “signed up for” had come to a tragic end; their hopes had died, and now they felt “dead” inside. Then, all of a sudden, a “Stranger” started walking along with them on the road; their sorrow kept them from “recognizing” Who this Stranger really was. This “Stranger” struck up a conversation with them, asking them why they were so sad? They said to Him: “*Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know of the things that have taken*

*place there in these days?”* And Jesus, almost playfully, asks: *“What sort of things?”* That’s when Cleopas goes on about how their dreams had been dashed with the words: *“...we were hoping that He would be the One to redeem Israel...”*. That line is so poignant, and it reveals an all-too-common human emotion. Maybe many of us have had a similar experience; anyone who has ever known a deep heartbreak or a tragic loss can easily relate.

This last month and a half while we’ve been kept from coming to Mass and receiving the Sacraments, and when we have been restricted from carrying on any of our normal life routines, has been a huge challenge for all of us. Of course, as we are reminded of so often, there is some comfort in knowing that “we’re all in this together”; and we all know that we want to, and need to, help support one another during this time. Yet, the fear of what’s happening, the worry about what might happen, the unknown about how long this will go on---all of that is not easy to bear. Similar to these discouraged Disciples who “were hoping.....but not any more”, it’s possible that maybe our Faith in God has been shaken by all of this. Do we find ourselves questioning God’s part in all of this, or what His plan for us is? Do we find it hard to “*recognize*” Jesus Present with us?

Jesus knew these disciples’ hearts were crushed, and He knew that they desperately needed help. So, He began talking to them about Moses and all the Prophets, He explained about the Messiah, and He taught them why “the Christ” had to suffer the things He did so as to enter into His glory. The more He talked, the more they started to come back to life. Something amazing started to happen to their broken hearts---their hearts started to “burn”. Their discouragement began to ease, and they started to have a new sense of excitement---the kind of excitement they remembered having when they first heard their beloved Master teaching on the mountain side, which is why they had begun to follow Him in the first place.

After a long time of listening to the “Stranger”, they arrived at their home in Emmaus, but the *“He gave the impression that He was going on farther”*. But they begged Him: *“Stay with us!”*. Isn’t that a beautiful, simple prayer? Maybe that’s a prayer that we can utter whenever we might feel lost, or when we’ve lost sight of Jesus in our lives: Jesus, stay with me! Then, St. Luke beautifully describes that when they went in, and they offered Him food: *“He took bread, said the blessing, broke it and gave it to them.”*. That’s all it took. St. Luke tells us: *“With that, their eyes were opened and they recognized Him, but He vanished from their sight.”* What an amazing experience; the original “a-ha” moment!

In my younger years, I understood that “moment” when St. Luke tells us that “*their eyes were opened*” and “*that they recognized Him*”, that he meant that they could now see that the “Stranger” was really Jesus. But in recent years, and especially in these last weeks when all of us have been deprived of being able to come together around the “Table of the Lord”, and when most of you have been denied the opportunity to receive the Eucharist, I now think that St. Luke was telling us that those two Disciples recognized Jesus in the Eucharist---in the Bread and in the Wine that Jesus Himself had (to use our technical theological terminology) “transubstantiated” into His very Body and Blood. That’s what I believe happened to those two disciples. And notice that St. Luke doesn’t tell us that they took the time to eat that consecrated Bread; only that they “*came to see*” Jesus in that Bread. They came to “*recognize*” Jesus in the “*breaking of the Bread*”.

That is the very meaning of the Holy Eucharist. The Risen Lord is really and truly Present in the Holy Eucharist, and with eyes of Faith, we are able to “recognize” Him. The Eucharist is the Gift of the Risen and Glorified Jesus to us and to all the world. And even in these dire circumstances in which we find ourselves, when we are kept from being with those we love, when we’re kept from doing what we normally do, and yes, even when we’re not able to receive Jesus Present in the Eucharist, we can still rejoice and allow our hearts to be “set on fire” as those disciples felt their own “*hearts burning within them*”, because we too can “*recognize Jesus in the Breaking of the Bread*”. Jesus is with us. He still gives us this most precious Gift of the Eucharist. And even when we can’t receive the Eucharist as Jesus primarily intended it to be, we can still be “fed” and “renewed” by the Eucharistic Presence of Jesus with us during these trying times.

My dear Family of Faith, every time we participate in the Mass, even when you have to do so virtually, you can, and you must, bring to Jesus here on the Altar whatever discouragements, fears, worries, suffering, or heart break that’s going on in our lives, which may distract us from “seeing” that God is with us, or cause us to doubt His Plan, or wonder about His purposes. Because when we do, when we take the time to hear Jesus speak to our hearts, and when we look with the eyes of Faith, we too will have our eyes opened, and our hearts set on fire with Love for the Risen Jesus Who is with us always. Jesus is never just a “Stranger” we might bump into along the road; Jesus, our Risen Lord, always walks the journey of our lives with us. When we bring our hopes, dreams, failures and even our sins---especially our sins---- to the Lord, God’s Word will set our hearts on fire with his Love for us, and we will see the Risen Jesus, alive and truly Present with us, in the Holy Eucharist. And then, just like these two

disciples we hear about today who, even though it was late in the day, literally ran the 7 miles back to Jerusalem to share the Easter Good News with their fellow disciples, we too will be renewed, revitalized, and re-ignited in Faith so that we can keep dealing with our life circumstances, during the rest of the time of this pandemic, and beyond, when our lives return to some semblance of normalcy.

The Eucharist is an integral part of understanding what Easter means. When we truly “recognize” Jesus in the “breaking of the Bread”, that’s when we will know completely what it means to say that Jesus IS Alive.

In today’s First Reading from the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, which records what took place just hours after the Apostles received the life-changing Gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, we hear Peter boldly proclaiming the Easter message: “*Jesus the Nazarene...a man commended to you by God....you killed; but God raised Him up, releasing Him from the throes of death.....Of this, we are all witnesses.*” That’s who we are as well. We are members of the Body of Christ. We have been baptized into Christ’s Death; we too have been raised to New Life in Him. And that same Holy Spirit, Who empowered Peter and the Apostles, has empowered us as well. We are to give witness to the Risen Jesus in our lives, wherever we are, and no matter what is happening in our lives, or in our world. As long as we keep that “fire of Jesus’ Love” burning in our hearts, and as long as we keep our eyes of faith focused so that we can recognize Jesus Present with us on the “roads of our lives”, we will be the faithful and joyful witnesses Jesus needs us to be.

Just as the first witnesses of the Resurrection had to work thru their human and natural emotions of confusion, fear, anger, sadness and discouragement before the Risen Jesus awakened Joy in their souls, so to do we, in the midst of all the real, and natural, emotions we’re experiencing in this time of crisis, need to root ourselves in that same Easter Joy.

May each of us continue to reflect upon the Easter message so that we come to a deeper understanding that the Risen Jesus accompanies us wherever we are and in all our life circumstances.

May our daily life journey be enriched by the “aha moments” which allow us to recognize the Risen Lord both in the Holy Eucharist, as well as in the people we encounter along the way whom we are called to love and to serve.

And most of all, may we beg the Risen Lord to “stay with us”, in good times, in bad times----  
at all times. God bless you, now and always.