

April 26, 2020: Third Sunday of Easter: Year A

First Reading: Acts 2.14, 22b - 28

Responsorial Psalm: Ps 16.1-2+5, 7-8, 9-10, 11 (R. 11)

Second Reading: 1 Peter 1.17-21

Gospel: Luke 24.13-35

Homily by Fr. Robert Weaver

As Catholics, one of our great gifts is how our Scripture readings at Mass are linked to the great events we are commemorating. For instance, today we are celebrating the third Sunday of Easter and the Church provides us with another appearance of the Risen Lord Jesus. It is one of the most well-known and most loved descriptions of the Resurrected Christ – the Emmaus event described by St. Luke (Pitre, MRE, p. 1).

It begins with Luke describing how the Risen Jesus met up with two disciples on their way to Emmaus but that “their eyes were kept from recognizing him.” Jesus asked them what they were talking about and Luke notes that they “stood still...[and that they were] looking sad.”

Their demeanor was likely one of utter gloom and they explained to Jesus the cause of their sorrow: “...Jesus of Nazareth...a Prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people...our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel” (see: <http://www.jrtalks.com/Luke/luke24v13to35.html>).

The disciples’ great sadness was most understandable. The crucifixion of Jesus was a horrific event which was prompted by the demands of the leaders of his own people. The disciples had hoped that Jesus was the one who was going to redeem Israel – a glorious leader who would free them from Roman occupation and oppression. But their hopes and perhaps even their certainty about Jesus being the Messiah came crashing down as he was led like a lamb to the slaughter and put to death

on a cross. Undoubtedly, they were in a state of uncertainty and distress as their lives had seemingly been turned “upside-down.”

(See <http://www.jrtalks.com/Luke/luke24v13to35.html>.)

During this current COVID-19 pandemic many people are also in a state of uncertainty and distress as our lives seem to be turned “upside down.” The predictable patterns of our daily routines have undergone great upheaval and we are being forced to cope with many unsettling disruptions and restrictions: Schools have closed, sporting and entertainment events are getting cancelled, and restaurants are shutting down. Moreover, people’s employment situations have been greatly disrupted and they may worry about their financial security. And many are rightly concerned about their health and the health of their loved ones. (See <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2020/03/17/news/crisis-calls-increase-covid-19-sparks-anxiety>.)

From all this it is evident that although the new coronavirus targets the physical health of people, the pandemic is also adversely impacting their mental health. For instance, crisis lines and mental health professionals are seeing a marked increase in calls as Canadians are seeking help to cope with their uncertainty and distress.

(See <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2020/03/17/news/crisis-calls-increase-covid-19-sparks-anxiety>.)

One director of a crisis intervention and suicide prevention centre, when commenting on the rise of people seeking help, stated that “[COVID-19] is coming up on every single call” (see <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/be-gentle-with-yourself-mental-health-phone-lines-see-increase-in-calls-1.5521754>).

Thus, it may be the case for some people that they are so seized by uncertainty and distress from the pandemic that they are having difficulty focusing on anything else.

Likewise, the disciples on the road to Emmaus seemed to be so seized by uncertainty and distress over Jesus’ death that they had difficulty focusing on anything else – even when they heard about Our Lord’s tomb being empty and that he had risen from the dead (see Pitre, MRE, p. 4).

This is evident when they say, “Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they

did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of Angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.”

It is at this point that Jesus begins to challenge their false assumption that he is dead. He explains to them that the Scriptures, which we now refer to as the Old Testament, actually point to him. And while Luke does not give us many details about how Jesus does this (although he says Jesus referred to Moses and the Prophets), it is safe to assume that Jesus outlined the Scriptures *typologically*. Typology is “the study of Old Testament prefigurations (events, realities, signs and things) that...are fulfilled in the New Testament, in the new covenant of Jesus – in his...[life, Death, and Resurrection]” (see Pitre, MRE, pp. 4-5).

For examples of typologies, consider how Moses, the great lawgiver in the Old Covenant, points us to Christ, who gives the New Law in the Sermon on the Mount (see Mt 5-7). Also, the powerful King David found in the Old Testament reflects Jesus, who assumed his royal throne forever. Moreover, the Jerusalem Temple sheltered the presence of God within Israel. And yet Jesus bore God’s glory in a more profound way for he himself is both God and man! (See Ignatius Catholic Study Bible, p. 28.)

After Jesus’ captivating explanation of the Scriptures, he and the disciples sat at a table. It was at this point that Jesus more fully unveiled himself. Luke tells us that Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the two disciples. They then finally recognized Jesus and, just like that, he was gone! This breathtaking manifestation of the Risen Lord left the disciples in awe, and they said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the Scriptures to us?” Not long after this they returned to Jerusalem, and their uncertainty and distress had turned into certainty and joy.

It is important to note how the Emmaus event reflects the way in which Jesus reveals himself in the Holy Mass. Just as how Jesus outlined his presence in the Scriptures to the disciples, so do we encounter his presence when the Scriptures, including the Gospel, are proclaimed at Mass. And just as how Jesus revealed himself in the breaking of the bread, so too is the Risen Jesus truly present in the Most Holy Eucharist – Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity. Furthermore, the grace of God that we receive at Mass can and does transform us! (See Ignatius Catholic Study Bible, p. 154.)

We know God's grace can be experienced in many ways. For example, I recall how in the Fall of 2013 I was undergoing considerable distress. I had re-entered St. Peter's Seminary after many years of being on my own and I was finding this major life transition rather difficult.

But then one day I was praying in the seminary chapel and I suddenly became very much aware of God's presence. I "heard" God's voice within my mind and he addressed me by name, "Robert." He expressed to me that he had called me to the seminary for a reason and that he loved me and that everything was going to be alright. I was truly struck by the sense of peace that I felt at that time.

I look back on this experience with gratitude and a stronger conviction of God's infinite love and mercy, for my distress had been changed into greater certainty and peace. These "God moments" in our lives when we encounter the Risen Lord in a powerful way are often unanticipated, and they are true highlights of our earthly pilgrimages.

Now turning back to the Emmaus event, it is very likely that the two disciples, upon their arrival in Jerusalem, radiated joy as they recounted to Jesus' apostles and others how they encountered the Risen Lord. And they probably shared this transformative news with others as well.

We are also called to share our meaningful “God moments” when we encounter the Risen Lord. As I mentioned, the current pandemic is leaving many in a state of uncertainty and distress and this will likely continue even when restrictions begin to ease and people resume somewhat “normal” lives.

Thus, it crucial that we tell others about the truth of the Risen Jesus, and how he accompanies us throughout our lives just as he accompanied the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. It is the Lord’s ongoing presence in our lives that changes our uncertainty and distress into certainty and joy.

As we hear today, those gathered in Jerusalem exclaimed, “The Lord has risen indeed and he has appeared to Simon!” And to this I exclaim, “Indeed the Lord Jesus has risen, and he has appeared to us also!” So, let us tell others how Jesus has appeared to us, and how he has made himself known to us in the breaking of the bread.