

OK, your RISUS PASCHALIS, or EASTER JOKE. We know that this Pandemic has turned the whole world upside down. Now old folks are sneaking out of the house, and their kids are yelling at them to stay indoors! \*\*\*But if you think it's bad now – guess what – in 20 years our country will be run by people homeschooled by day drinkers. \*\*\*I suggest that you do NOT call the police on suspicious people in your neighborhood – those are your neighbors without makeup, dyed hair and haircuts! \*\*\*Since we can't eat out, now's the perfect time to eat better, get fit, and stay healthy. We're quarantined! But who are we trying to impress? We have snacks, we have sweatpants and comfy pj's – I say we use them! And finally, does anyone know if we can take showers yet – or do we just keep washing our hands?

This story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus just might be my all-time favorite gospel passage. As usual, it has many layers of meaning. First, it tells us a great but painful truth about life. Every dream – eventually gets crucified. It didn't just happen to Jesus. It happened to 12 apostles who had followed Him, and the larger circle of followers He had attracted. It has happened to everyone who has ever tried to do something good, true and beautiful. It's happened to every idealistic young man or woman starting out to be the best teacher/priest/spouse/parent, you-name-it. Why is this true? It seems to have to do with the very nature of living in a flawed world. Because either time, circumstance, jealousy, or just life itself, somehow cannot leave the good alone. Somehow it always seems that it is hunted down and struck. The good will always be envied, hated, pursued, smudged, killed. It's true even of dreams. Something there is that needs a crucifixion. Every body of Christ inevitably suffers the same fate as Jesus. There's no smooth ride for what's whole, good, true, or beautiful. Look at how many prophets in the world who have been killed, mocked, jailed. Martin Luther King, jr., Nelson Mandela, Mohatma Gandhi.

But this also happens to all of us in one form or another. I've had people say to me through the years: "I thought everything was going just perfectly – or I felt like we were just at the threshold of something wonderful – or I finally seemed to get it all together" – and it all comes tumbling down. COVID 19 is just the one that has most recently captured our attention – unless we have also just experienced a bad diagnosis, a heart attack, a death, job loss or divorce. Sometimes it just seems like life never gives us a break. It can be very disheartening. "We had hoped" are some of the saddest words we could ever say – or hear.

But that's only half the equation, the bad half. And so my second point, also there in this beautiful story: What is also true – and what the resurrection teaches – is that – while nothing that is of God can avoid crucifixion, no body of Christ ever stays in the tomb for long either. God always rolls back the stone – and soon enough – new life bursts forth and we see why that original life had to be crucified. "Was it not necessary that the Christ should have to suffer and die?," the text reads. Resurrection FOLLOWS crucifixion. Every crucified body will rise again. Always. It is the deepest truth of our faith, the Paschal Mystery. Resurrection always FOLLOWS crucifixion.

But where do we meet the resurrection? And where does the resurrected Christ meet us? Scripture is subtle, but clear. The gospel tells us that, on the morning of the resurrection, the women-followers of Jesus – who are the midwives of hope – set out for the tomb of Jesus – carrying spices, intending to anoint and embalm a dead body. What they find is not a dead body, but an empty tomb – and an angel challenging them with these words: "Why are you looking for the living among the dead? Go instead into Galilee, and you will find Him there!"

Go instead into Galilee. What an odd expression! What is Galilee? And why go back? In the post-resurrection accounts in the gospels, Galilee is not simply a physical geography. It is, first of all, a place in the heart. Galilee is the dream, the road of discipleship that they had once walked with Jesus, and that place and time when their hearts had most burned with hope and enthusiasm. Galilee is young love, the honeymoon, the star-eyed idealism of our youth, what set us out on a path to do great and wonderful things with what the poet Mary Oliver calls our “one amazing, wonderful life.” Just when we feel that it’s all dead, that we were only following a naïve or misguided fantasy, we are told to go back to the place where it all began: “Go back to Galilee. He will meet you there!”

Third, there is that interesting detail about where these disciples were actually walking. They were ‘on the road to Emmaus.’ In Luke’s gospel, we are told that on the day of the resurrection – two disciples were walking away from Jerusalem towards Emmaus, their faces downcast. That single line contains an entire spirituality: For Luke, Jerusalem, like Galilee for the other gospel writers, means the dream, the hope, the kingdom, the center from which all is to begin and where ultimately all is to culminate. And the disciples are ‘walking away’ from this, away from the dream – towards Emmaus. Emmaus was a Roman Spa – a Las Vegas or Monte Carlo of human consolation. Their dream had been crucified and the disciples were discouraged, hope-emptied. And so they were walking away from it, towards human consolation, muttering: “But we had hoped!” They are abandoning the dream, going for the cheap and easy fix, the spa treatment to make the pain go away.

But the most significant detail is that they never get to Emmaus. WHY? Because Jesus appears to them on the road, reshapes their hope in the light of the crucifixion, and turns them back towards Jerusalem.

One of the essential messages of Easter is this: Whenever we are discouraged in our faith, whenever our hopes seem to be crucified, we need to go back to Galilee and Jerusalem, that is, to the dream, to the road of discipleship that we had embarked upon before everything went wrong. The temptation of course, whenever we feel this way -- whenever the kingdom doesn’t seem to work -- is to abandon our discipleship for human consolation, to set out instead for Emmaus, for the consolations symbolized by Las Vegas or Monte Carlo. During this pandemic, the temptation is to abandon God, church, hope. To throw our hands up in despair and say “What’s the use? I worked so hard – and it’s all in tatters. I’m going to binge watch TV, find my face at the bottom of a quart of Haagen Das every night, drink until I fall asleep on the couch. I’m giving up – I’m taking care of me. Me. Me.” No, this gospel tells us. What we need to do is reset, readjust and recapture – who we are as church, how we ARE church. And then perhaps, for the first time in our lives, we may realize the gift we have been given in the church, flawed as it is and we all are, and the gift we have been given in the Eucharist and our Sunday gatherings. That’s Galilee. That’s Jerusalem. That’s the place of fulfillment.

And so the disciples do go back, to Jerusalem, to that special place in their hearts, to the dream, to their discipleship. Sure enough, Jesus appears to them there. He doesn’t appear exactly as they remember Him, nor as often as they would like Him to, but He does appear as more than a ghost or a mere idea. The Christ that appears to them after the resurrection no longer fits their original expectations, but He is physical enough to eat fish in their presence, real enough to be touched as a human being, and powerful enough to change their lives forever. Ultimately that is what the resurrection challenges us to do – to go back to Galilee, to Jerusalem, to return to the dream, the hope, and the discipleship that had once so inflamed us but that now has been crucified by life itself.

And, as we all know in our deepest hearts, we never quite get to Emmaus. In one guise or another, Christ always meets us on the road, burns holes in our hearts, graces us to deal with our latest crucifixion, and

sends us back – to Galilee and to our abandoned discipleship. And once there, we are able to start to live the mystery yet again. And again. And again. For life. Amen. (adapted from Ronald Rolheiser, posting of 3/23/2017)

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