

HOMILY FOR SUNDAY 26TH APRIL 2020

Easter 3A

READINGS: Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19; Acts 2:14a, 36-41 and Luke 24:13-35

Anyone who has ever truly despaired, to the extent that they haven't seen any way out except to flee from the situation that has caused them pain and sorrow, can identify with the pain and confusion of those two disciples who set off for Emmaus on that long-ago Sunday evening.

Now Emmaus was situated only 11 kilometres from Jerusalem, but the journey for Cleopas and his companion must have felt like an interminable funeral march. Their drooping heads and lagging bodies revealed their crushing grief and sadness. They stumbled their way home all the time remembering the awful events of the Passover weekend that had so shattered their hopes and dreams.

They were stuck in sadness and grief. They were immobilised and confused. They had seen their rabbi, their Teacher, arrested, condemned, tortured and killed. With his death their dreams had died within them. Their planned future had died with him. They wallowed in self-pity. The women's testimony to the Risen Christ had only confused them. The women said, "His body has gone and angel told us that he's alive," but Cleopas and his companion couldn't see how that can be true.

So, they've left town. They've given up and they are moving on. They are stuck on Saturday, but Sunday has already come.

We get stuck too, don't we? We get stuck in grief. We get our hopes dashed and we get stuck wondering where we go next. We get stuck in worrying about our children, our parents, our grandchildren, our nieces and nephews, and our friends. We worry about the ones who make bad decisions or get their hearts broken or dabble with drugs or mix with the wrong people or any of the thousand and one things that can go wrong. We worry about our health, or our partner's or parent's health. We worry about our finances. We worry about the state of the world. We worry about our jobs and our workplaces. We worry about COVID 19 and what it might do to our health, to the shape of our communities, to the economy, to jobs and travel, and how it all will end.

We get stuck in an ideal. We get stuck in an emotion. We get stuck in fear. We are immobilised. Sometimes we wallow in self-pity. Sometimes fear stops us from moving. Sometimes we just don't know the way forward and we're stuck in powerlessness.

Perhaps that is why the story to the road to Emmaus is one of the most loved Gospel stories because we can see something of ourselves in Cleopas and his companion as they stumble down that road stuck in sadness and grief.

Perhaps Emmaus is symbolic of the places where hopes have been quashed, dreams shattered and the raw emotion of grief felt most profoundly.

Scott Hoezee said: "There are any number of things in our lives that drive us to Emmaus. But if we can find Jesus even there, then we sense with renewed wonder the punch of the line, "Surely, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." The first time Luke shows us the reality of that divine presence was in Emmaus. Emmaus, of all places. Of all places! But that's just the point: all places, all the time. It's Jesus. Thanks be to God!"

For the wonder of the story of the road to Emmaus, and the source of great hope for us, is that Jesus did not leave Cleopas and his companion stuck in their grief and loss but rather came to them and gave them what they needed for them to be able to move forward into hope and fullness of life.

For Jesus moved alongside of them, listened to them and then taught them what they needed to understand the events of the past few days that had so grieved and puzzled them. Jesus gave of himself to them, to two ordinary people who were lost and afraid, because of his great love and compassion. They knew that they wanted to hear more so they offered him hospitality- a meal and a bed for the night.

And it was in the meal, as their guest broke the bread that they realised that it wasn't a stranger who was sharing their meal, but rather the One in whom they had placed all their hopes and dreams! As the dawning of realisation came upon them, he disappeared from their sight, but in that moment their lives were forever changed. They went from despair to joy, and somehow, they had hope again.

It has been suggested that, "Hope is born not in knowing where you are going but in knowing who is leading the way." (Lindy Black)

Those two disciples may still have not fully understood all that had happened on that first Easter Day, but now they were fully convinced that Jesus was alive. Furthermore, he was still leading them on the way, and that God's power was fully present in him. They knew this because he loved them enough to come to them in their despair. He came, but did not impose himself upon them, but rather, he took time to walk with them and to hear their sad story. Only after he had done that, did he reveal to them the true meaning of that which they had witnessed. In doing this, Jesus gave a wonderful example of how to be a true friend to those who are suffering.

Albert Camus wrote, "Don't walk in front of me; I may not follow. Don't walk behind me; I may not lead; walk beside me and be my friend."

We may not help someone who is suffering by imposing explanations or excuses, or by trying to get them to brighten up or put on a happy face. We help them when we are willing to sit with them or walk with them, and hear their story, and weep with them (or laugh or sit in silence with them), all the time taking cues from them as to what they want. Sometimes, we will be able to offer hospitality in the form of meals or practical help. Only when we've done that, and only when they are ready, can we offer our words of faith or hope or explanation and expect them to be heard.

If Jesus had revealed himself to those two disciples earlier, he may well have given them heart attacks! Most certainly, he would not have had the opportunity to give them his explanation for what had happened or they would have been too emotional to take in what he was saying. And it was his explanation to them that helped the early church to start to understand what was going on in the death of Jesus.

For after Jesus' disappearance from their sight, God's Spirit spoke to Cleopas and his companion warming their hearts and helping them to perceive the wonders of what they had heard and seen. They then could not keep it to themselves, so they rushed back to Jerusalem to share their good news with the other disciples. They had discovered the redemptive and healing power of the resurrection through the loving friendship of the Risen Christ.

We, too, can trust that in our times of sorrow and suffering, Jesus will walk with us. Walk with us as our friend, offering his love, his compassion, his listening, and his strength, until he takes us home to be with him forever. Amen.

