

KEEPING OUR EYES FIXED ON JESUS

PART THREE: EASTER

We have been trying throughout these past three days to approach the Sacred Triduum keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus. On Holy Thursday at the Mass of the Lord's Supper when we did so we watched Jesus humbly wash his disciples dirty feet and share with them his own life in the Eucharist and then tell them that doing both, not "either/or", was an essential requisite for his disciples. On Good Friday at the Commemoration of the Lord's Passion and Death we watched Jesus die the cruel death of crucifixion and noticed that because he did it out of love for us that we must be worth it in God's eyes. And tonight we find ourselves at an empty tomb.

A fascinating image of Easter are those in each of the Gospels that show the disciples standing at the empty tomb, mouths opened, full of questions and fear. None of the four Gospels recount the actual event of the resurrection of Jesus; they only recount the discovery of an empty tomb. St. Matthew's account that we hear this year includes some practical details: an earthquake (similar to the moment of Jesus' death in his Gospel alone), an angel with a message (similar to the angel who announced Jesus' birth to St. Joseph in his Gospel) and armed guards assigned by the Jewish and Roman authorities to prevent the disciples from coming to steal Jesus' body and then claiming he had risen.

In Matthew's account Mary Magdalene and the other Mary do not find Jesus, dead or alive. Rather they find an empty tomb, soldiers who are scared to death and an angel who interprets this experience for them. The angel's explanation seems to have helped them; perhaps it may help us understand our faith experience better too.

First the angel has to tell them not to be afraid. Over and over again throughout the Scriptures the first reaction of people who in one way or another come in touch with the reality of God, God's presence or God's call is fear. The experience of God is always too much to comprehend and certainly too much to control. And in response they are always told, "Be not afraid". I am convinced that one of the reasons that the famous hymn by that title is so popular and why it so often moves people to tears is that we have the same primitive response of the people of the Scriptures and in particular of these two women tonight. Fear is way too common an occurrence in our

lives and it is the greatest obstacle to real faith. I cannot understand God and God's way and I cannot comprehend or control the experience of God in my life and so I am afraid. It is hard to really trust God especially when things feel out of control. Have you ever been in the place of these two women?

Secondly the angel tells them that Jesus is alive and he points out the place where he had been entombed. It's empty. Tombs and other places and forces of death are no place to look for Jesus. He is not there.

So where do we find Jesus after the crucifixion? In Galilee. What a curious expression! What is Galilee? And why go back? In the post-resurrection Gospels Galilee is never just a geographical location. It was for those first disciples the place where they lived, the place where they first met Jesus, the place they left at his invitation, the place where it all began. It is a place of the heart. They are told to go back to the place where they live and Jesus will meet them there. And they go back and, sure enough, Jesus meets them there. He doesn't appear exactly as they remember him nor as often as they would like him to, but he appears as more than a ghost and more than an idea. The Jesus who appears to them after the resurrection no longer fits their original expectation but he is tangible enough to be embraced and powerful enough to change their lives.

There is a great truth of our Easter faith in that revelation. *Jesus always goes ahead of us to meet us where we live.* in the midst of life rather than in some separate space. If you really want to keep your eyes fixed on Jesus, look where you live. It is a recurring phenomenon that people claim that they cannot find Jesus/God in church. Today's gospel tells us why that is so often the case. If you cannot find Jesus/God where you live, in your relationships, in your daily work, in the joys and concerns of your life you will never be able to find him in church. Recall the experience of Shug in the book and movie "The Color Purple" She tells Miss Celie that she has never found God in church. She says, "I just found a bunch of folks hoping for him to show. Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folk did too. They come to church to *share* God, not find God."

Once you discover a real living God/Jesus in the places where you live then you should have no problem finding him in church or in the scriptures or in the sacraments.

The Jesus we meet will not be the same as we remember him. Our childhood experiences of God last only as long as we are children. As we grow and mature our faith must change and grow and mature as well or else it will not satisfy us. Many people try to survive on the faith of their childhood, the faith they learned about as a child at home or in religious education class and toward which they can look back nostalgically. When they cannot find it in themselves or in the Church they determine that it must have been just a childhood thing. But faith is a lifetime thing. As in all other areas of human life what served us as children will not serve us as young adults, what served us as young adults will not serve us in middle age and what served us in middle age will not serve us in the twilight of life.

Jesus will not appear as often as we would like. It is noticeable that Jesus did not appear to the disciples all day every day for the rest of their lives. There were those intense and sacred moments in which it was clear that he was with them. At other times they had to go on memory. It is similar with all of us. There are those moments when I know God is real and that he loves me deeply. Then there are other moments when it feels like he no longer exists. But the living pattern of the way faith in the risen Jesus works is such that we need to remember and cultivate those moments and circumstances that have brought his real presence. We each have those moments in our own lives: a moment of intense prayer or special need, a time of great blessing or a time a deep sadness, a birth, a death or just some surprising moment. We need to call them back to mind and heart especially when God seems distant or my need feels more acute.

The community of faith, the Church, has certain moments like that too when we say that the real presence of God is guaranteed. Such moments and events as the stories of the scriptures, the sacraments, the ministry we do in Jesus' name to continue his mission in the world and the example of faith that we share with one another here all can serve to evoke and nourish the experience of the living God in each of us.

And one sure fire way of experiencing a risen Jesus is to do what we noticed him doing on Thursday night and Friday: giving of himself to others. When God seems distant or even non-existent there is nothing like giving of yourself to someone else to reawaken yourself to God's very real presence in your life and in this crazy world. It helps you recognize that in the end it's not about you or your money or your kid or what team he/she makes or what school he/she gets into or your rank or your job or what others think of you.

In the end what is most important is loving others as Jesus has loved us and there is nothing like it to reawaken Easter faith.

Finally the experience of the risen Jesus is powerful enough to change our lives. The testimony of believers is that faith is real, tangible and that it changes them. Ultimately faith is about transformation. Remember, Jesus was not resuscitated; he was resurrected. That means he was transformed and the great test of whether or not one really believes in Jesus is that somehow they are also transformed by their relationship with him. That is where the rubber meets road: how your faith in Jesus changed you for the better?

The message and reality of the living God and God's faithful love cannot be stopped. The Gospels tell us that the people of power tried everything they could to stop him. They executed him, they placed a large stone over his tomb, they even posted an armed guard to keep him in and to keep others out. But none of it worked. The tomb was opened; Jesus was raised up; the message was spread.

Tonight/today we celebrate that great truth once again. Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus.