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Stay With Us, Lord!

Biblical Reflection for Easter Sunday C

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, MARCH 31, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://zenit.org)).- Pounding hearts, wounded hearts and burning hearts. The image of the human heart permeates the beautiful Easter Gospel of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). It is a very human story, full of pathos; stylized in pattern, and suggesting a Eucharistic celebration (vv 30-32). The disciples come with their questions and doubts (vv 13-24); the Scriptures are recited (v 27); words of clarification and instruction are exchanged on the road (vv 25-27); and finally, the moment of recognition comes in the context of a meal (v 31).

These facts are clear from the account: On Easter night, Cleopas and his companion are going away from the locality where the decisive events have happened toward a little village of no significance. They did not believe the message of the resurrection, due to the scandal of the cross. Puzzled and discouraged, they are unable to see any liberation in the death, the empty tomb, or the message about the appearances of Jesus to the others. In their eyes, either the mission of Jesus had entirely failed, or else they, themselves had been badly deceived in their expectations about Jesus.

Road conversation

When we meet the disciples on the road to Emmaus, it is evening, and the glow of that first Easter day has begun to fade. Resurrection for them is nothing more than a rumor or a tale. Buried beneath their verbal exchange lies a deep yearning and a holy hunger. Intimately intertwined with their skepticism is their hope, and their need for God to be alive, vibrant and present. But the baggage of their doubt, sadness and despair impedes the fervor of their faith. They fail to recognize Jesus.

Without being aware of what they are really saying along the road, the two disciples profess many of the central elements of the creed of the Christian faith, yet they remain blind to the necessity of the Messianic suffering predicted in the Scriptures. They are so caught up with their own sadness that they fail to recognize Jesus.

The stranger on the road to Emmaus takes the skepticism and curiosity of the disciples and weaves them into the fabric of the Scripture. Jesus challenges them to reinterpret the events of the past days in light of the Scriptures. However, Cleopas and his companion are "foolish and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have said!" (v 25)

"We were hoping"

The Emmaus disciples saw their hopes and dreams dashed and crushed. Theirs is a piercing cry: "We were hoping" (24:21). They were expecting this Jesus to be a mighty liberator or warrior. They never imagined the outcome of that terrible Friday on a hill outside the walls of Jerusalem.

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We know what happens when such feelings overtake us: We become despondent, indifferent, cynical and sad. How many times have we been like the two on the road, uttering those same words: "We were hoping."

We were hoping that the marriage would have remained intact and the family united. We were hoping that wars, violence and terrorism would have ceased. We were hoping that that the economic crisis would not have affected our family, resulting in job loss, uncertainty and imposed poverty. We were hoping that our children would have remained in the Church. We were hoping that the ravages of sickness and ageing would have spared a loved one or even ourselves much physical and mental anguish.

Like the two on the road to Emmaus, do we not feel that we are victims of time, fate, circumstance and external factors?

We cannot live without hope, but we must be prudent and wise in our hoping. Given the cultural and social context in which we live, there is a risk of reducing Christian hope to an ideology, to group slogans, to mere appearances and feelings. Nothing could be more opposite to Jesus' message! He does not want his disciples to simply recite a role of hope. He wants them "to be hope."

To believe in the Resurrection does not mean we embrace fleeting ideologies, secular strategies, cheap slogans and catchy themes. It means that we fall in love again with God's envoy, the Risen Lord, and remain in an intimate relationship with him. Apart from him we can do nothing. We cannot afford to simply be people "who were hoping." Rather we must become hope, and we can be so only if we remain united to him.

"Stay with us"

"Stay with us, Lord, for it is nearly evening" (24:29). This was the fervent plea that the two disciples addressed to the stranger who had walked with them along the way. "Stay with us" is also the prayer of the early Church to the Risen Lord that he not abandon them in their searching for his new presence.

The nightfall at Emmaus is not only the sunset of that first Easter, but it marks the night of faith and doubt, uncertainty and obscurity, confusion and chaos. As Christians, we know that this night is always followed by the dawn of faith and hope. This is illustrated beautifully by the words of St. Gregory the Great: "Since daybreak or dawn is changed gradually from darkness into light, the church [...] is fittingly called daybreak or dawn. The dawn hints that the night is over. It does not yet proclaim the full light of day. While dawn dispels darkness and welcomes the light, it holds both of them, the one mixed with the other. [...] Are not all of us who follow the truth in this life daybreak and dawn?"

Amidst the shadows of the passing day and the darkness that clouded the disciples' spirit, the stranger brought a ray of light that rekindled their hope. "Stay with us," they pleaded. In the intimacy of the breaking of the bread, the disciples' eyes were opened and they recognized the Risen One in their midst. How often do we turn to the Lord and plead, like the two on the road: "Stay with us!"

Burning hearts

At table in Emmaus, the disciples' hearts began to gradually burn within them (24:32) as they came to understand with their minds the truth about the suffering Messiah. The "Good News" descended from their head to their heart, and they experienced that strange and wonderful feeling of their hearts gradually on fire. The analogy of the "burning hearts" is the only way for them to adequately describe their recognition of the Lord.

I remember a beautiful phrase of the great French Catholic author of the last century, François Mauriac: "If

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you are friends with Christ many others will warm themselves at your fire. [...] On the day when you no longer burn with love, many will die of the cold."

Appearance to Simon

Just as the two disciples were moving away from the city of Jerusalem in verse 13, the end of the story finds them moving back to Jerusalem, to be reunited with the other disciples and apostles who waited for Jesus in the Holy City (v 33). The story's conclusion is an abrupt announcement by the assembly to the ones returning back to the community rather than, as expected, the two disciples' relating of what had just occurred (vv 33-34).

How can we describe the Lord's appearance to Peter and the group of apostles and disciples in Jerusalem? Could it be that Luke has the "Eleven and their company" proclaim the appearance to Peter and announce it first before the travelers' report, in order to be true to the Lukan understanding of the apostolic circle around Peter as primary "witnesses of his resurrection" (Acts 1:22)?

The appearance to Peter and the testimony of the apostles thus obtain logical priority in the building of the Church. From the very beginning, there was great significance attached to "being with Peter and the apostolic circle." This does not diminish the Emmaus travelers' encounter. On the contrary, the happening "on the road" is authenticated and confirmed by being made part of the greater united Easter witness of the assembly of apostles and disciples of Jesus.

Nostalgia

The question lingers: Why does Luke alone spend so much time relating the Emmaus event? The story was most likely told in response to Jesus' continuing historical absence and its perception as a loss to Jesus' followers. The main theme of the story is truly recognition of the Lord, not just a recognition of his bodily presence, but of his powerful presence in the Scriptures and in the action of the breaking of the bread. The issue is how Luke uses the story to teach his readers in 80 A.D. They might have been saying to themselves that 50-60 years ago, people were so fortunate to have seen the Risen Lord with their very eyes.

Nostalgia would cause people to say that having been there, back then, might make a difference in the way that they think and believe today! But Luke says that even those who were there weren't able to recognize Jesus until the Scriptures were "opened" and the "Eucharistic" meal was shared. The bottom line is this: A past generation is not more fortunate or blessed to have encountered the Risen Jesus than is a generation that hasn't seen him!

Faith in Jesus transcends all history, space and time. Christians of Luke's time and Christians of our time have the same essential elements necessary for recognizing the Lord: sacred Scripture and the Eucharist.

For Cleopas and his companion on that first Easter, their journey was a gradual, painstaking process requiring a careful remembering and rearticulation of the events of salvation history found in the Scriptures, along with an experience of the Risen Lord. It is no less the same for us, who continue to interpret the Scriptures in this day and age, and move from faith-filled insights to a proclamation and lived experience of the One who is truly risen from the dead. Emmaus places some important questions before us, as individuals and as a faith community.

Questions for reflection

How is Jesus alive and present among us? Is our own friendship with Christ contagious? Do we burn with love for him? Do people avoid us because of our coldness? Are our own hearts gradually on fire within us

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when the Scriptures are opened to us? When have we taken the road back to Emmaus, preferring to remain in the familiar, among what is known and calculable, rather than move forward to the unknown challenges of new life?

When have we experienced that strange and wonderful feeling of "the burning heart" as we listened to the Word of God at the Eucharist or in private prayer? What do Peter and the Apostolic Tradition mean for us? When have we given in to nostalgia, in our faith life, religious life and experience of Church?

Let me conclude with this prayer for the Easter season:

Stay with us, Lord, for it is evening and the day is far spent.
Just as the two disciples prayed on that evening in Emmaus,
Help us to be focused and centered on you,
Our Lord, our hope and our life.

When doubt and despair fill our lives, stay with us, Lord.
When sadness and emptiness tempt us to believe that you are absent,
Fill us with your consoling presence.
When selfishness prevents us from reaching out to others,
Teach us your art of selflessness.

Stay with us, Lord,
And help us to remember that the royal road of the Cross
Is the only way for us and for the Church.

Stay with us, Lord, along the journey,
And help us to discover you each day
In the breaking and sharing of the Word and the Bread.

Stay with us, Lord, as we journey to the New Jerusalem
Where you are light, peace, and endless home. Amen.

[The readings for Easter Sunday are Acts 10:34a, 37-43; Colossians 3:1-4 or 1 Corinthians 5:6b-8; 2 John 20:1-9 or Luke 24:1-12 or Luke 24:13-35]

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On the Net:

Salt and Light: www.saltandlighttv.org

The Beauty of the Resurrection: www.saltandlighttv.org/prog_slprog_snl_presents_easter_video0.html

Easter Reflection "How Shall We Find Words for the Resurrection?":
www.youtube.com/watch?v=byx_YBLck0k&feature=related

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Easter reflection on Salt and Light: www.saltandlighttv.org/prog_slprog_snl_presents_easter_video1.html

Thank You JPII: www.youtube.com/watch?v=tN8SflZ0uR4&feature=channel

or

Thank You JPII (longer version): www.saltandlighttv.org/prog_slprog_thanku_jp2.html

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