

THIRD SUNDAY EASTER A APRIL 23, 2023 OSJ

Remember what it was like for you? I mean, when your own world collapsed, your own hopes and dreams and future seemed cancelled in an instant?

You know: the diagnosis is cancer; or you're fired; or a loved one has died; the police are at the door.

That's what happened to these disciples. They had dared to hope that, in Jesus, God's Kingdom was at hand, that God would finally rescue those who trust in God's Covenant.

But now, that awful Friday seemed to expose it all as a cruel hoax. Jesus has been murdered. Who could ever believe again? In him? In God? In anything good?

Tears blur everything these disciples see, including that stranger walking by their side.

You know what that's like. Haven't our own tears blinded us in the same way? Hasn't that same dreadful accusation echoed in our own hearts, deafening us?

You know how it goes:

God? If there is a god, why allow this to happen—to me, to innocent children, to people already bowed down with too much burden and sorrow?

Millions of Catholics—and we all know some—won't be at mass this weekend because of such trials, such crushing blows, when pain or loss seem to blot out the very light of God.

Or perhaps it wasn't anything so dramatic; perhaps it was just the thousandth small wound, the unending daily disappointments that led them to say: "I can't believe in God; or at least, I can't walk with the people of God's Church, anymore."

It's like that story of the cynical father who decided to impart "wisdom" to his son. He made the boy climb a tree, then told him, "Jump into my arms. I'll catch you." The tearful boy wouldn't jump. "Don't worry. I'll be right here to catch you," said the father.

Reluctantly, the boy screwed up his courage and jumped, and as he did, the father turned away, letting the boy fall to the ground. "That's what I want to teach you," declared the cynical father, "Never trust anyone."

Many live by that so-called wisdom. They say: there is so much pain, so much evil in the world, that you can't trust anyone.

You can't trust other people; they are just out to take your money.

You can't trust your family; they just mess up your life and make you feel bad about yourself.

You can't trust God; God isn't there; or God doesn't care; or God already condemns us.

That's why it's easy for us to relate to those disciples walking on that road to Emmaus. Their story of distress and disillusion and defeat is one with which we are intimately familiar.

But notice what Jesus does. He listens. He doesn't interrupt; He doesn't scoff at their pain or minimize it; He walks by their side and listens and compassionates with them.

And only then does He tell them another story, an older, deeper, richer saga, into which God is weaving their story. Their story is God's own story, as God's story becomes theirs.

And only because Jesus has walked with them, and listened to them, and carried their pain, will they in turn be able to listen to Him.

Deitrich Bonhoeffer, the great German theologian murdered by the Nazis 81 years ago this month, once wrote:

“Christians have forgotten that the ministry of listening has been committed to them by the One who is Himself the Great Listener and whose work they share. We should listen with the ears of God so that we may speak the Word of God.”

Christ has entrusted that ministry to the Church and to each of us disciples. But for us to walk and listen and compassionate with God’s wounded ones—victims and victimizers alike—we first need the grace to recognize Christ walking with us in our own wounds and fears.

The great truth we proclaim this Easter season, and at all times, is that the Risen Christ continues to walk with each of us; and just like those first disciples, at first, we don’t recognize him.

He is present to us, listening, humbly carrying our pain. The Lord never punishes, never wounds our human dignity. The Lord does not extort our obedience or demand our attention.

Any authoritarian gesture would disfigure him far more than the nails, the thorns and the spear.

Instead, in the silence of our hearts, he whispers, “Don’t be afraid. It is I. I am here, and I love you.”

Recognized or not, the Risen Christ remains close to every person, even those unaware of Him. He is there in secret until we can hear the story again, and recognize Him again

--in our wounds, which are His;

--in our small and fragile company, which He has made His own;

--in the breaking of the bread and sharing of the cup, which he has made His own Body and Blood.

Will we let him place that source of refreshment in the hollow of our being? Will we share with Christ, and with each other, our own story, including our sorrow and our sin?

If we will, then day by day, we will sense more of the depth and breadth of a love beyond all comprehension.

From it, until life's end, we will draw wonder and the courage needed for new beginnings.

When we listen to the story anew, in the silence of our hearts, we realize that Christ comes, not to condemn but to transfigure what is most disturbing in us and in our world.

When the darkness grows deep, Christ's love is a fire. We need only fix our gaze on the Lamp burning in the darkness, until day begins to dawn and the morning star rises in our hearts.

For we know well that we are not the ones who create this source of light. It comes from Christ.

The Holy Spirit, that dazzling visit of the Love of God, flashes through each human life like lightning in the night. By this mysterious Presence, the Risen Christ takes hold of us; he takes everything upon himself, even the trials that are so hard to bear.

And only later, often much later, will we understand that God's overflowing life is never lacking.

And then we too will say, “Were not our hearts  
burning within us as the Lord spoke to us?”

And then we will be able to walk with other fearful,  
wounded, worried ones, and listen to them, and carry their  
pain, and share Good News with them. And all of us  
together will come to recognize Jesus

in our stories,

and in our company

and in the breaking of the bread.

And the people of God said, Amen.