

...And Their Eyes Were Opened...

Easter Sunday, 2010

If you are particularly lucky this Easter Sunday—more likely so if you attend an afternoon or evening Mass—you'll get the benefit of a rare occurrence in Catholic Liturgy. The homilist will have the option to actually CHOOSE the Gospel reading from either the traditional Easter account of the empty tomb, or what is slated as an "optional" reading for the day. No, it's not the story of the Easter Bunny. It's the stirring account of the appearance of Jesus to the disciples who are on their way from Jerusalem to Emmaus.

As only Luke, the evangelist with the best sense of humor could tell it, here are three of Jesus' closest friends walking down from Jerusalem to the seaside town of Emmaus, talking to themselves about the amazing happenings of the past few days, when this stranger (the unrecognized Jesus) joins them and coyly asks, "What are you guys so excitedly talking about?" Such a kidder, this Jesus!

Their response is classic: "What? Where the heck have you been? Haven't you heard about this teacher named Jesus, and how he got killed, dashing our hopes that he was the Messiah who would get us out from under Rome's thumb! And about the rumors that someone has taken him from his tomb!"

You can imagine Jesus trying hard not to roll his eyes, experiencing even in his resurrected state the "will-they-ever-get-it?" frustration he surely felt all through his years with them

Ever the patient teacher, Jesus walks with them, listening intently, then finally carefully showing them through a discourse on the ancient prophecies how *their* picture of what the Messiah would look like, and how *his* kingdom would

actually unfold were in reality two quite different plans.

Despite our alleged sophistication and supposed evolutionary edge, we modern day disciples are often just as dense about getting who this Jesus really was, and what his gift to us truly is.



Yes, we love the empty tomb story—complete with glorious light, angels, the mystery of resurrection. We get to be the observers of glory, and by association, vicarious experiencers of that glory. The BIG Event! We love this stuff—all the larger-than-life drama that Jesus brings with his miracles, healings, and now, his own resurrection.

Drama, we do love. But, in the same breath, when we really look at what brings us the greatest joy in life, it is NOT the dramatic events, the BIG deals.

Think of the last time you felt deeply joyful. Was it that big vacation that set you back a month's salary...or was it that simple hang-out time in the kitchen when your teenage son actually forgot the secret teenboy code and spontaneously hugged you while you were making dinner?

Or the last time you laughed so hard that your sides ached...was it at some 2-drink minimum comedy club, or in the midst of some silly conversation you had with your sweetheart before falling asleep?

Is there something wrong with vacations and comedy clubs? Of course not! We humans need planned vacations, and scripted comedy to take the edge off of everyday life's pressures.

Luke seemed to have known this need for BIG glory and SIMPLE joy as well—that's why we have from Luke not just a retelling of the Matthew, Mark and John account of the empty tomb, but this heartfelt story of the road where it is in animated and, in its authenticity, unpredictable, conversation and the sharing of a simple (yet unforgettable) meal (the breaking of the bread) that the people who love Jesus finally "get" him.

No lightning bolts. No angels. No voices from the sky. Just broken people sitting down at a humble table, breaking simple bread.

We Catholics are great about pomp and ritual—we love the glory, and pray and sing about it all the time. And that's a good thing. But maybe what Luke and Jesus are reminding us about in this account is that the place we are most likely to encounter the wonder and power of God isn't necessarily in the rolled-away stones, the blinding glory, the angelic appearances, the drama of BIG, divine things, but, rather, in the simplicity of mundane, human things. Things like the disappointments that vanish and joys that become richer when we open to the possibilities beyond our preconceptions and habits. Like difficult conversations that become easier when we open our minds. Like mundane daily tasks that take on miraculous overtones when we open to the actual grace within them.

The Road to Emmaus leads us past the glory of Jerusalem to a place where, if we allow our eyes to be open, the real glory, the life-restoring power of God, is right there in our hands, not inaccessible and not shrouded in awe and mystery. Perhaps asking Jesus to join us on our daily walk is the first step to being opened to the joy that lies so within our grasp, if we only dismiss our picture of what glorious things are supposed to look like, and come to appreciate the simple grace of our actual lived experience as we break bread (and barriers) with one another.

