

Did you hear the scriptures read today -- the story of Jesus' resurrection? Did you hear the reaction of those closest to Jesus? Luke 24:11 -- Listen again: "But these words of the women seemed to them (the apostles) an idle tale, and they did not believe them." Then, later, even though the women had told them that Jesus was alive, some of them walked, still discouraged, on the road to Emmaus. As they walked, the Risen Lord met them and went with them, but they still didn't recognize his presence. It wasn't until later, when he broke bread with them, that they realized it was Jesus.

It is a blessing, that the Bible tells us this!! Here we are, gathered to celebrate that death has been defeated, that sin holds no power to destroy us, that a kingdom awaits us, and that there can be new life right now, all because God loves us. Here we are, and what do we hear? We hear that those closest to Jesus during the three years of his ministry, those who heard him preach on the hillside and beside the waters, those who had shared in his miracles, those who had broken bread with him as only friends can in the intimacy of the upper room, those who had heard him teach about the kingdom of God, could not recognize the truth of the story of the empty tomb! They expected death, so they couldn't see life. And later, even though Jesus was right with them, they didn't recognize his presence! (Pause)

What about us? Year after year, we have gone through the Christian seasons, trying to get a “handle” on this Jesus who is supposed to mean everything to us. We celebrate Christmas, and then, several weeks later, we find the recently-baptized adult Jesus in a wilderness, facing all sorts of temptations to use his power the way Satan wants him to... But Jesus refuses... And then we are immersed fully into the season of Lent, where we're supposed to be sorry for all the ways we have let God and others and ourselves down... The readings from scripture involve talk of Jesus heading toward Jerusalem to die, and his teaching that in order to gain life one must be willing to lose it, to let go of it. We see how, on the way to Jerusalem, the disciples who walk with him seem to be less and less able to understand what Jesus is talking about.

Then, there's Palm Sunday, which is sort of like the gate to Holy Week. The people are acclaiming Jesus as King and laying palms on his path and everything seems really exciting, but all of a sudden everything turns around and Jesus is totally mistreated. The religious big-wigs act to get the Romans to kill him, his friend betrays him, another denies even knowing him, and the disciples act only to save their own hides, not to help Jesus when things get dangerous. The people demand that Jesus be crucified, and finally Pilate washes his hands of any responsibility... An agonizing death, and then, for those of Jesus' day, an incredible, unbelievable surprise: death gave way to life.

What are we to make of all this? Is it that God doesn't give up, even when human beings totally fail God? Is it that death is not the end? Is it that Jesus came back to life and was present with the very persons who had let him down. That he forgave them and made it possible for them to have new life?? All of this is what God wants us to recognize and receive.

It doesn't always happen. Sometimes there is no recognition at all of God's work in our lives. Flannery O'Connor, 20th Century Southern writer who died at the age of 39, was a Catholic woman who loved to share deeply troubled characters in her stories. In her first published book, *Wise Blood*, she told the story of a man named Hazel Motes, the grandson of a preacher who “has

Jesus in him like a sting.” At the age of eighteen, Motes is sent to the war and he comes home crippled and disillusioned. Right in the heart of the Bible-belt South, Motes decides to set up his own anti-church, the Church without Christ. “I’m member and preacher to that church where the blind don’t see and the lame don’t walk and what’s dead stays that way.” (Suggested by James A. Feehan, *Story Power*)

Polls show that the majority of people in the United States say they believe in God, and many will hopefully attend worship today. But how many of us recognize the presence of the Lord Jesus in our lives right now? How many of us can proclaim that our lives are really new because of Easter? Is there recognition that the living God is at work in our midst right now? Are we here for history (just to hear an old story that makes us remember the good old days, or to enjoy the “happy ending” of Easter) or are we here for Hope?

Preachers' words can sometimes so muddy the waters that the true message of God in human life cannot be heard. I have a friend who says she is an agnostic. She complains that folks don't need some “stone rolled away” story, but instead that they want to have their own lives *touched*. Get this straight: Touching real lives is precisely what Easter, Christmas, and all of Christianity are all about! The message is this: GOD IS IN OUR MIDST, RIGHT NOW, whatever our "right now" involves. If you are swamped with money problems, God is with you. If you are struggling with depression or worrying over what lies ahead in life, God is with you. If you are having a horrible time in a relationship with someone, God is with you. If you are ill and facing death, or if you are losing someone you love to death, God is with you. As Paul declared to the Roman Christians (Chapter 8), NOTHING can separate us from the love of God, as shown to us in Christ Jesus. In Jesus, who today has shown us that not even death is final, God touched our lives and continues, even right this minute, to touch our lives.

A young woman was stricken with a progressively debilitating disease. An older woman in her church sent her a card and a copy of the frequently-circulated little story, "Footprints in the Sand." If you don't know it, it's the story of a person having a dream in which his own footprints through the sand of life are shown to be next to other footprints, God's, as God walks along with him through his life. But at the worst times in his life, the man sees only ONE set of footprints, and asks God: "Lord, why weren't you walking with me during those very hard times of my life?" To which God replied, "Oh, but I was. You see only one set of footprints in those places because in those times I carried you."

The young woman, whose life was being ravaged by the illness and whose husband was not dealing with her illness well at all, found the little footprints story helpful. Since it happened to be Holy Week, she wrote in her journal:

"Dear God, even today, as things seem to be falling apart, I see the footprints in the sand, and realize that you have carried me through my life and are carrying me now. That little story tells a deep truth, one I need to hold on to. You are with me. I can go on in life. I thank you, especially for the story this week of Jesus' suffering, and for Easter. It tells me that it's okay if I die, that the illness threatening to undo me will not, finally. It tells me that, in spite of my failure to be able to believe enough in you, you still love me enough to see me through. It tells me that

even if I cannot keep my children safe in this frightening world, they are safe with you. You love them now and will love them, without any lapse, throughout their lives and deaths. I will try to release my grasp on the searing anxiety which has diminished my life, for You are my God. Thank you." (pause)

Next week's Gospel lesson will give us the story of Thomas, the disciple who wasn't present when the Risen Jesus visited his disciples in the locked room, and thus the disciple who wouldn't believe that Jesus had risen until he had proof for himself. Very helpful for those of us who struggle with doubts and wonder if it's true, as we all do sometimes.

But today's scripture gives us something else, also wonderfully helpful: it shows us that, even though the ones closest to Jesus expected only death, and even though they did not recognize the Resurrection when the Risen Jesus was right there with them, nevertheless Jesus DID give them new life, and he WAS with them... Even when WE expect or experience only death, even when we cannot recognize the presence of Jesus Christ with us, God is at work in our lives, bringing redemption and new life, whether we see it or not. That's good news, and it is a promise we can claim all the way through life and death.

The late Dr. Peter Gomes, for years preacher at Harvard University Chapel, shared this simple statement: "The meaning of Easter is that you don't have to die in order to live. Easter is for now, for you, and for keeps." He then shared a story which originated with Booker T. Washington:

"A ship lost at sea for many days suddenly sighted a friendly vessel. From the mast of the unfortunate vessel was seen a signal: 'Water, water; we die of thirst!' The answer from the friendly vessel at once came back: 'Cast down your bucket where you are.' The desperate signal was run up again, and again, three more times. Each time, the friendly ship instructed them, 'Cast down your bucket right where you are.' Finally, in desperation, the men on the ship did throw over a bucket. They hauled up water, expecting it to be salty when they tasted it; instead, it was clean and pure for drinking. They were at the mouth of the Amazon River, but had not realized it."(*More Sundays at Harvard*) Recognition.

As life tosses us and turns us around, we may not recognize what God is providing for us. Jesus Christ is the Key to unlock whatever door is keeping us from LIFE. Abundant life includes forgiveness, hope, and guidance as he is with us every breath of our lives. Jesus not only can open us to *receive* these things, he can open our hearts so that we can offer to *others* forgiveness and hope; perhaps this is the most amazing miracle of all! Recognize his presence, ask him to open your heart's door and whatever else is hemming you in, and you will be blessed, no matter how devastating the storms; through life, through death, and forever. Happy Easter. Thank God! Amen.

Now we sing a song, out of *The Faith We Sing*, "You Are Mine," that is for me an expression of our Lord's loving presence and promise for each of us. # 2218. As we sing it, may we recognize the HOPE God offers us.