

I'm always intrigued by how hard it was for the disciples to grasp the reality of the Resurrection. After all, Jesus had told them that he would be killed and after three days be raised up. The Gospel records that even the chief priests and the Pharisees knew that he said this. In the Gospel of Matthew we read:

*“The chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, “Sir, we remember that this impostor, while still alive said, ‘After three days I will be raised up.’ Give orders, then, that the grave be secured until the third day, lest his disciples come and steal him and say to the people, ‘He has been raised from the dead.’”*

It seems that it was well known what Jesus had said about his death and rising again. Yet on the third day the women went to the tomb to mourn. They took spices with them expecting to anoint a dead body. They were surprised to find the tomb empty, and they immediately thought that someone had stolen the body. No one said, *“it's been three days, Jesus will rise today, let us go out to meet him”*. There is all this amazement at finding the tomb empty. And when the disciples did start hearing that people had seen him, they still had a hard time believing it. I have always wondered why?

There are clues in today's Gospel which recount the events on the day of Jesus' Resurrection and tells us about Jesus' first appearance to the Eleven that evening. But when he came into their presence they did not say, *“finally, we were anticipating your rising and were anxiously waiting to see you”*. No, they were terrified and thought he was a ghost, because they still did not understand.

It seems clear that even though they had heard what Jesus had told them about his death and rising, they did not really comprehend the significance of what he was saying. These ideas were too abstract for them to truly embrace.

In those days there were various beliefs about death and what happened after death. The Sadducees did not believe in the immortality of the soul and viewed that at death the soul just ceased to exist. The Pharisees did believe in the immortality of the soul. They also believed in the resurrection of the body, but only at the end of time. Still others believed in reincarnation. We see evidence of this belief when Jesus started his preaching ministry and Herod thought that John the Baptist had come back from the dead. We also know that there was a belief in ghosts. In the Old Testament book of 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel we can read the story of King Saul going to a medium to summon the ghost of the prophet Samuel. But when Jesus appears that evening he renders all these beliefs irrelevant. Because of Jesus' Resurrection, we believe not only in the immortality of the soul but also the reunification of the body and soul in a glorified state for eternity.

To prove that he was not a ghost, Jesus encourages his disciples to touch him, and he eats in front of them. Ghosts don't eat and you can't touch a ghost. He shows the disciples the wounds in his hands and feet to prove that the very body that suffered three days before was the same body standing before them, not reincarnated but resurrected. His mere presence sets aside the beliefs of the Sadducees because he was dead and

now is alive body and soul. The Pharisees got it almost right, but Jesus did not have to wait to the end of time to be raised, he was there in front of them that very day. When he says, “*Why are you troubled?*” he demonstrates divine knowledge because he knows their thoughts of confusion and fear from the moment he enters the room. He shows them that he is really their Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, risen from the dead.

Intellectually the disciples may have understood what he had told them before, but what he claimed was so far outside of their understanding of reality, they could not believe it in their hearts. He had been executed by his enemies and they had to face the reality of his death. The brutal reality of the crucifixion obscured their belief that he was the divine Son of God.

I think we can all relate to their state of mind. I know that I have not responded in the manner that I intellectually thought I would when confronted with a really frightening situation. This happened to St. Peter, who, after proclaiming that he was willing to die for Jesus, denies him three times that very night. When the reality of actually having to die with Jesus became an actual possibility, Peter’s resolve crumbles. It is easy to believe when there are no challenges to our faith, but it becomes much more difficult when we are tested.

Jesus’ appearance that evening subjugated the reality of his brutal physical death with the new reality of the Resurrection. But it took time for the disciples to understand the meaning of the empty tomb. Their understanding of the Resurrection had to

come from the real experience of seeing and touching Jesus. Only then did joy begin to creep into their hearts.

Today's Gospel can show us how to overcome our own doubt and confusion. The events reported in this Gospel occur immediately after the experience of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. If we look at that story together with today's Gospel, we see what it took for the disciples to finally believe. They had to experience two things; they had to be able to touch Jesus, and their minds had to be opened to the understanding of the Scriptures.

The two disciples at Emmaus said that their hearts were burning within them as Jesus opened their minds to the understanding of the Scriptures. It's interesting to note the typology here. The Emmaus story is a type of the Mass. First Jesus interprets the Scriptures for them and secondly he breaks bread with them. He opens their minds to the Scriptures and then invites them to touch him in the Eucharistic meal. For us, every Mass is the same dual encounter with Jesus in the Word and the Eucharist.

The homily at Mass is meant to break open the Word of God so that we can understand the Scriptures. Unfortunately, many of us homilists don't do that well enough to make your hearts burn within you. Ultimately it is the Holy Spirit that will set our hearts on fire.

We are blessed, like the disciples on that Resurrection day, to not only contemplate the Scriptures, but to be able to touch

Jesus's body right here today, when we receive communion. The Mass provides us with the same two experiences that enabled the disciples to embrace the reality of the Resurrection. Jesus says to us as he said to his disciples that evening, *"it is I myself, touch me and see"*.

The reality of the Easter mystery is not self-evident, that is why it is a mystery. We must grow in our knowledge and understanding of the Resurrection. Just like the disciples 2000 years ago, we can not do this on our own. We need the gift of God's Grace to do it. Like the disciples we must respond to Jesus' invitation to touch him and let him open our minds and set our hearts on fire.

Jesus had a purpose that evening beyond proving his Resurrection. In opening the disciples' minds to the Scriptures and everything that was written about him, he tells them that they will to be witnesses to all these things, that they will proclaim the Good News to all the world, that *"the Christ would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance, for the forgiveness of sins, would be preached in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem"*. We too are witnesses to the Good News. We too are commissioned to spread the Word as the disciples did. We hear that commission in one of the dismissals at the end of Mass: *"Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord"*. May the Lord give us the Grace to do so.