

Easter 3

If we took our readings for today and put them in chronological order, what would we have? The Gospel would come first because there we are still at the very beginning of Easter faith. Then the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles would come second because it describes the apostles' first attempts to preach Jesus as the risen messiah. And the second reading from the first Letter to St. John would come last because it reflects the life of a church community some fifty or sixty years after the beginning of the church.

Time is so important in our lives. We age personally and that brings changes, and the world in which we live ages, and that too brings change. Time is also important in the life of the church. And just as the emotional character of our personal lives can change in a moment, so too in the life of the church. For example, in our gospel today we are in a room in Jerusalem, and the two disciples who met Jesus on the way to Emmaus have just returned to tell the eleven and others gathered with them there about meeting Jesus on the road and not recognizing him until he broke bread with them. And the eleven then tell these two men that the Lord has also appeared to Peter. So both are reporting, we could say, sightings of

Jesus. And then, we are told, while they are still speaking, Jesus is there among them wishing them peace. And they, despite what they have just said to each other about seeing Jesus on the road or hearing about Peter's having seen Jesus, are startled and even terrified, thinking that they are seeing a ghost. And so the Lord attempts then to convince them that he is not a ghost. He tells them to look at his hands and feet and even touch them, and then he eats a piece of baked fish to convince them that he is real. Now their mood changes. Now they are "incredulous with joy." Joy has replaced terror.

Can we duplicate their experience? Can we go from being startled and even terrified by the Lord's appearance to incredulous joy at seeing him? "It's just too good to be true," we sing in an old popular song. I think that is what the Gospel is telling us about these first followers' reaction to the risen Lord's appearance among them. It is just too good to be true. And certainly, they can't take their eyes off of him.

Many people tell us that they have had similar experiences of their beloved dead appearing to them, or if not the beloved ones themselves, then tokens of their presences which appear repeatedly and therefore become recognized signs of the beloved one's

presence. And sometimes these appearances are so frequent that they become almost ordinary, and therefore there is no longer a feeling of shock and terror but rather a feeling of comfort that our beloved ones are alive and well, though in a world different from our own.

The church is slow to recognize such personal experiences. Sometimes, of course, she is confronted with so much evidence that she cannot refuse to recognize them. Then she might say that it seems safe to believe that the Blessed Mother did appear to a simple French girl in the 1850s in France and identify herself as the Immaculate Conception. Or it seems safe to believe that the Lord himself appeared to a St. Margaret Mary Alacoque, in the 1670s, in Paray-l-Monial in France, asking her to establish devotion to his Sacred Heart. And so on in many other times and places in our Church's history.

Some of us are quite skeptical about all such apparitions, even those approved by the Church. Yet we seem more open to such appearances in our own lives. And when they are frequent, they become almost ordinary and therefore do not startle or frighten us. A widow will tell us that her husband, now six years dead, was at her bedside the other night, and she engaged in conversation with

him. He had something important to tell her. So she simply listened. What are we to make of such reports?

This much we can say. Our faith is based on the belief that Jesus of Nazareth is alive and well, and that his victory over death is meant to be the first of many, indeed of millions of such victories, including our own. We will pass through death to life. When we pray, we put ourselves in contact with this world beyond our world. We pray to God whom we can neither see nor hear. We pray to the Lord Jesus, the risen one. We ask the help of saints and people who have died but whom we knew here in this life. Our liturgy reminds us of this extended world when it urges us to pray: “Therefore, overcome with paschal joy, every land, every people exults in your praise and even the heavenly Powers, with the angelic hosts, sing together the unending hymn of your glory.” Heavenly powers, angelic hosts and unending hymns of glory. We are in another world here. We pray for our beloved departed and ask the aid of the Blessed Mother, of St. Joseph, of the Apostles and all the saints who have lived throughout the ages, that we may merit to be coheirs to eternal life with them. Yes, this is a world that goes beyond our senses and yet is as real to us as the world at our front door.

But, in the end, we cannot expect to duplicate the experience of these first believers in the room in Jerusalem. They saw the Lord, apparently with their eyes. In John's Gospel the doubting Thomas does not accept Jesus' invitation to put his finger into his side. It is enough to have seen him. "My Lord and my God," he says, and that is all. But the next sentence, spoken by the Lord Jesus is aimed at us. Jesus said to Thomas: "Have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed." There we are. We do not see, at least not in a totally physical way. But we do believe, and through this belief we have life and incredulous joy.