

30 April 2017
Third Sunday of Easter

*Delivered at the 10am Mass at the Church of Saint Ignatius,
Chestnut Hill, MA
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I have good news and bad news. First the good news: Last weekend I had the privilege of baptizing five new little Christians here at St. Ignatius. We have Baptisms on Saturday mornings once a month here, except during Lent, so the first Baptisms of Easter has a backlog of little ones dressed in white garments. And in the past two weeks, we had RCIA here that welcomed the newly baptized and elect who were received fully into the Church. A cause for celebration!

And now the bad news: we couldn't start the baptisms on time last Saturday – not because any of us were running late, as happens, but because our church was clearing out from a large funeral. The smell of funeral incense still hung in the air, and the casket was being brought down the front steps, just as the to-be-baptized were being brought up the steps by their families. What an image – new life coming in to die to death, and the dead leaving to rise to new life. Good news and bad news passing one another – but is it bad news?

There is something beautiful and extravagant in the image of being wrapped in white, of being wrapped in new life. **Every baptism is a**

mini-Easter – a washing away of our death and a rising to new life – as a beloved child of God, in a community of faith. We mark our core Christian identity by being robed in white. This identity that comes to us at Baptism, and goes with us to the grave. At funerals, the mourners dress in black—but not the deceased! They get to wear baptismal white. The casket is draped in a white pall, as we commend our beloved dead back to God.

Last year I attended an interesting funeral for the mother of a Jesuit friend, Fr. Greg O’Meara. The deceased matriarch, Ginny, had a rapier wit and she loved people. She loved people so much, she had seven children – all sons – one of whom was a Jesuit priest. ☺ ***Her life sounds like a story from the Hebrew Bible!*** And Ginny O’Meara loved to host big dinner parties, where she would preside from the head of the table, dealing out zingers and warm smiles in due turn. Good food and drink was always at hand. And there was always room for another at her dinner table.

At her funeral, her seven sons covered her casket with the long white funeral pall. Fr. Greg then told us that the pall they used was not the usual funeral pall, but the table cloth from their dining room. She requested this amendment to the rite, because this white table cloth called to mind many

great feasts of love held at the table. ***“And any remaining stains on the table linens are just signs of particularly exuberant meals we had together.”***

I love that image – being draped in familiar white linens of life, and love, and joy. The linens of *new* life carry with them still the memories of *this* life – food dropped here, wine spilt there. We try to scrub out our stains totally, but that might be missing the point.

In last week’s Gospel Jesus appears to his disciples and shows them his wounds, reminders of his earthly death. In his post-Resurrection appearances, the God-man still bears the wounds from this life – they are not totally eliminated -- but they are *transformed*. And in today’s Gospel, Jesus’ disciples on the road to Emmaus are downcast, sad, dismayed. There is a sinking feeling that maybe Jesus was a phony, and they move to despair. I take solace in this story; there are times where the weight of our life commitments, or our job, or the boredom of routine, settles in. Who hasn’t looked around and thought, ***“geez, I hope I didn’t bet on the wrong horse!”***

In their naval-gazing, Jesus’ disciples miss out on Jesus’ presence, as he walks beside them ***the entire length of their journey to Emmaus***. They do not recognize him – they lament and mourn, and lick

their wounds of discouragement. And then Jesus wakes them up from their worry:

“Oh, how foolish you are! How slow of heart to believe all that the prophets spoke! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and enter into his glory?”

Where are you and I slow of heart to recognize Christ’s presence? All around us, we have little moments of Easter. We have glimmers of light in the dark. We can “sniff out” where new life is on offer to us, if we cultivate what Richard Gaillardetz calls “the spiritual habits of recognition.” There are three ways to sniff out Easter, I think:

1) **We can look at the Post-Resurrection accounts in the Gospels** to see stories of the disciples moving from fear and incomprehension, to understanding, joy and excitement. There are four movements that are common to Jesus’ post-Resurrection apparitions to his disciples. Each begins with despair: “Jesus is dead, and all hope is lost!” Second, Jesus intervenes in some way. Thirdly, Jesus offers a sign of his identity – his wounds, or his breaking of the bread. And finally, the disciples recognize Jesus, and respond with joy and peace.

2) We can receive the grace of this joy by looking out at the **beauty of the seasons**. All around us, new life is on offer – if your eyes can't detect it, surely your allergies can. Have you noticed it?

3) *Finally - we can receive Easter joy by recalling the great moments of joy in our own life.* If you imagine **Resurrection as a banquet** around a table covered in white, who would all be sitting around it? I can tell you who it is for me. My family. **My college buddies and their spouses and children.** Several Jesuit brothers of mine. My deceased grandparents. And **the stories we would tell** and the **laughs we would have**...it would be awesome. Stories from childhood. What are the great memories of joy – the baptisms, the funerals, the great family feasts -- that you would talk about in your Resurrection banquet?

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We move now to our *own* encounter with Jesus in the Eucharist. We enact again that meal that Jesus had with his disciples at Emmaus. Luke writes:

While he was with them at table, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. With that, their eyes were opened and they recognized him...in the breaking of the bread...

Let our prayer today be to recognize that Christ is always with us, walking this long and winding journey of life. When we enter this Church -- for Baptisms or funerals, for weddings or just the quiet routine of Sunday Mass, let us pray for the grace of Easter joy. Gerard Manley Hopkins writes, “Let Him *easter* in us, be a dayspring to the dimness of us, be a crimson-cressed east.”

What appears as bad news – the sadness of death and loss – is inextricably wound up in the good news of Easter. Happy Easter, friends. I hope you and yours have a ***particularly exuberant*** feast.

Deacon Joseph Simmons, SJ