

Homily: Third Sunday of Easter  
(May 8, 2011)

*In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Sometimes you need to just go for a walk. I find that when I can get outside for a stroll and breathe the fresh air, my mind becomes clearer and my thoughts become less muddled. It can be anywhere: the forests of my childhood home near Ottawa, the quiet of the Bruce Trail or even the urban oasis of High Park in Toronto.

Cleopas and his companion were out for a walk. They were heading to Emmaus which is about seven miles from Jerusalem. Perhaps they had a purpose for traveling to Emmaus, or perhaps they just needed some fresh air to air out their thoughts, to walk and talk-see if they could sort through the ups and downs of the week past.

Along the way they were approached by a man. There was something familiar about him, something just out of the reach of recollection. You know that feeling, when you see a person you get the sense that you have met before but you just can't remember where, or what their name is?

As the man neared them he asked, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" Apparently he hadn't been watching *The Nazareth* with Peter Mansbridge. Has this guy been under a rock the past week? If they only knew.

"Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days...?" they asked him. "...The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him....Moreover, some women...came back and told us...that he was alive."

The humour of this scene is palpable; so many of Jesus' followers do not recognize him after the Resurrection – Mary at the tomb mistakes him for the gardener, Simon Peter doesn't recognize him when Jesus suggests casting the fishing net on the other side, Thomas had to literally touch him to convince himself it was the Lord. Then there was the time seven of the disciples didn't recognize him sitting on the shore beside a prepared fire and breakfast.

I wonder why this is. Could it be we only see what we are looking for? I once had the opportunity to spend a day with one of Ontario's Coroners. On a house call we discovered a man in his mid-sixties who had been found dead in his bed, lying face down, his clothes strewn along a path from the front door to the bedroom.

Each of us went around the house seeking to piece together the cause of death, the circumstances leading up to it and so forth. It was a game of clues, clues that had to be read and interpreted to tell the story of this man's final hours.

At one point he asked me what the first thing was I had noticed. I replied, "There is a crucifix on the wall and a Polish Missal on the night stand." Similarly curious I asked him the same question. His reply was, "There is a banana peel in the garbage indicating he at least had a moderately healthy diet. The clothes taken off at different points along the hall to the bedroom are not torn and have been removed from top to bottom – tie then shirt then under shirt and so forth. This means he was probably having trouble breathing and tightness of chest, which combined with the swelling and colour of the skin, could indicate a heart attack."

Having concluded the cause of death, he continued: “Since there are paid bills on the table and no signs of forced entry, there are no suspicions and this appears to be natural causes suspicious.” You see what you are looking for.

Human beings seek out symbols that convey meaning. We gravitate to objects and rituals that are associated with something or someone we value—religious objects, personal tokens, family heirlooms, animals or a variety of items that carry a particular smell and evoke particular memories.

These symbols that are invested with such meaning are more than mere representations but rather powerful signs that point to and even help convey that which they embody. In effect these signs to a large degree evoke their presence and by doing so initiate a change within us.

This is why certain symbols, actions and objects have come about in the life and liturgy of the Church. The story and object of our faith is made real through these sacred items and gestures. They do not necessarily bring God closer to us, but rather serve to draw us closer in spirit to God.

This reality was something the two disciples walking to Emmaus would become keenly aware of before the end of our story. But before they did as they walked on the stranger began to instruct them about the Scriptures. Their first thought as the stranger was speaking was that he must be a rabbi.

Now I know I am making an assumption here about their coming to this conclusion, but I have a strong suspicion since Jesus – like my seminary professors –

begins by pointing out they are mistaken before correcting them: “Oh, how foolish you are, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!”

He then proceeds to cast their discussion into the framework of the faith of Israel. Beginning with Moses and going through the prophets he shows them that the Messiah’s death and resurrection are foreshadowed in the Scriptures, because it is deeply rooted in Israel and its eternal covenant with God.

Now their hearts began to burn. That warm feeling of familiarity overwhelmed their senses and infused their minds and hearts, yet they still did not recognize him. But the feeling was enough to want to hear more.

So they invited the stranger to come and stay with them for dinner as it was getting late. After a little coaxing, they found a spot, lit the fire, cooked the meal and prepared some bread and wine.

As was the custom, the learned man, the rabbi reached out his hand and taking the bread he blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them. Then in that simple ritual the heavens tore apart and the dawn of revelation pierced their souls; shattering the spiritual blinders their eyes were opened and a sense of familiarity morphed into their friend and master.

Then just as suddenly he was gone. He had fed them with the Word and nourished them with the bread of heaven – simple objects and gestures that now had the power to reveal Jesus in their midst and leave them changed. They could not hold on to him, but through these he would always be with them.

It is a profound truth that the simplest gestures can evoke the most intense experiences: A gentle touch communicates healing, a smile creates belonging, a word produces faith.

It is equally true that ordinary things can embody the most profound experiences: A flower reveals new birth to the heart, a ray of sunlight carves out hope in the soul, a rock forges perseverance in the mind, a piece of bread and cup of wine become the Body and Blood of the Son of God and unites us to the Holy Trinity.

I wonder why we first seek answers to questions in complexity; why we look for solutions to the problems only in the convoluted and obscure, which serves only to cause despair. It seems to me that if God can communicate the profundity of his Word and Spirit in simple objects and simple people, than the answers are probably to be found in the same.

Perhaps instead of getting all worked up as we do, the best thing we could do when faced with the difficulties of life is go for a walk with Jesus...and let him do the talking.