

Perhaps we've settled into Eastertide by now. After all, it's been a couple of weeks since that joyous morning of the empty tomb. The forecast tells us spring is at least *predicted* to be in the air, so I guess the season is unfolding after all.

Looking back over these first three of the seven Sundays of Easter, we might be tempted to think that the story fits together pretty neatly. The disciples *seem* to go from grief to joy in the blink of an eye. One minute they're lost and confused, the next their minds are opened to the Scriptures.

But, as is usually the case, when something *seems* too good to be true, there are two possibilities. First, it *is* true, and it's something in life worth dying for, and we call it God. Or, second, it's our way of simplifying something mysterious and overwhelming, so that it doesn't threaten us, and so that we can control it. Some would call that idolatry. Today's gospel reading and its interpretations include a little of each.

First, let's look closely at the gospel. Even though the stone had been rolled away from the tomb, and even though Jesus had already appeared to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus and to Simon Peter, the disciples were still "startled and terrified" when Jesus stood among them and said, simply, "Peace be with you." They thought he was a ghost, because they'd seen him die on the Cross, hadn't they? They'd gone from the joy of the Triumphal Entry to the grief of the Crucifixion in less than a week, and they were so caught up in their sorrow that they could only imagine that this was some trick their hearts were playing on them. They so wanted Jesus to be alive, but he couldn't be, could he?

Jesus realized how they were feeling, so he tried to prove to them that he was alive. "Look at my hands and feet," he says. "A ghost doesn't have flesh and bones, but I do. I am real. I am risen." And he showed them his hands and feet, pierced by the nails of the Cross.

Yet, despite all that, they weren't convinced. Luke says that "in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering," which is an absolutely fascinating, but not very clear, way of describing their response. Some commentators have taken that to mean that the disciples had a hard time believing how happy they were that Jesus was alive. After being so lost and distraught, they were supremely joyful, and it was hard to believe that everything had turned out so wonderfully!

But that seems a little too neat and tidy to me. Especially when Luke says that not only were they *disbelieving*, but also that they were still *wondering*. To say that they were “still wondering” implies that they still had some of the same doubts they’d had a few minutes earlier, *before* Jesus showed them his hands and feet. And if that was the case, then I think it’s more likely that their disbelief had more to do with their doubts about Jesus really being alive, than their joy over the fact that he was.

Because to say that they went from grief to joy in the blink of an eye – that they went from not being able to even believe that Jesus had risen to not being able to believe how happy they were that he had – is a bit of a reach. It makes a lot more sense, knowing human nature, and knowing human grief, to conclude that they weren’t entirely convinced. That they were still wondering, still disbelieving, still in need of more proof, which Jesus eventually gave them, in the most common of ways. “You got anything here to eat?” he asks.

“Sure, here’s a piece of fish,” they reply. He eats it, just like any old person eats any old piece of fish. Just like he’d eaten fish with them at the miracle of the loaves and the fishes that we read not too long ago. Just like he’d eaten bread and drank wine with them that last time – or what had seemed like the last time – just a few days earlier. Not as compelling a piece of evidence as holes through his hands and feet, probably, but more moving.

The image of him eating, sharing a meal with them, had taken them back to the meals they’d shared in the years they’d followed him, learned from him, worshipped him. “I’m the same person I always was,” he said to them by noshing on that piece of leftover fish. “And I will never leave you.”

Only then could their minds be opened to understand the Scriptures, seeing that Jesus was the fulfillment of all that had been written in the law and the prophets and psalms. In an action as ordinary as munching on some fish, truth was revealed to them, and their disbelief was washed away.

And while that might be the nice and neat conclusion that readers always like to reach and authors tend to provide, the most interesting part of this gospel reading, for me, remains that earlier point, where the disciples were both joyful *and* disbelieving. Because that middle ground, where our hearts feel something that our mind has yet to accept, is a place where many of us reside throughout our spiritual lives. For while some of us came to know God through rational argument and thoughtful reflection, I dare say

that most of us first responded with our hearts to God's offer of love and acceptance. That our hearts jumped ahead of our still-questioning minds, because the intellectual doubts didn't seem half as important as the promise of an eternal home that just felt so good and right and true that it couldn't not be.

Frederick Buechner describes such a moment in his life when his *heart* knew God in ways that his *mind* didn't.

It was a lump in the throat. It was an itching in the feet. It was a stirring in the blood at the sound of rain. It was a sickening of the heart at the sight of misery. It was a clamoring of ghosts. It was a name which, when I wrote it out in a dream, I knew was a name worth dying for even if I was not brave enough to do the dying myself and could not even name the name for sure.

(*The Alphabet of Grace*, pp. 109-110)

You see, *before* their *minds* were opened, back when they were overwhelmed with disbelief and wondering, they knew in their *hearts* that Christ was risen. Their joy *preceded* their understanding, as it does for many of us today. And if there's one thing we can take away from today's reading, it's the divine approval for believing in our hearts *before* we understand with our minds. That's the way it was for the disciples on that fateful day, and the way it is for many of us now.

And lest we feel concerned that it is so, all we have to do is note the response of Jesus. When he first stood among the disciples, he went to great pains to assuage their doubts. "Look at my hands and feet," he said. "Let me prove to you that I am alive." But once he sensed their joy, intermingled as it was with doubt and wonder, he didn't try to prove anything more to them. He just dwelt with them in the most common of ways: by sharing food, by teaching them – by doing the same things he'd always done with them. And that is the way God treats each of us when we rejoice in him, regardless of what doubts and wonderings might still be present.

He doesn't take further steps to prove anything, because he doesn't need to. For our joy reflects that our hearts understand, and our minds eventually will, as well, and all we need is time in the presence of God, doing things as mundane as eating fish and as remarkable as understanding the secrets of the Scriptures. When the love of God is in our hearts, all these things will follow in good time.