

Easter 3
4.19.26

Who is the most famous person you've met? What was that meeting like? Encounters with sports figures, actors, or political leaders can be euphoric and the memory of those encounters can last a lifetime.

Here's some of the famous people I've met. When participating in a benefit basketball game with some fellow priests, I played against Crawford Kerr (who incidentally was a member of this parish. He played for the Dallas Cowboys. Other athletes like Winky Wright the boxer, Rock Riley the sportscaster, and several Tampa Bay Bucs were our opponents. When visiting New York City with a priest friend of mine, I sat at a table next to Tony Bennet. We had a brief conversation when we finished with our meal. I shook hands with George H.W. Bush when he was Ronald Reagan's Vice President. And I met Pope (now saint) John Paul II on three different occasions.

Meeting various sports figures, a famous singer, a vice-president and future president, as well as the pope made a lasting impression on me. I'm guessing that encounters like these are so profound because they give us the impression that we are able to enter into the lives of the talented and famous.

On occasion, I've heard some people say that they would believe in Jesus if he was born in this day and age. Video evidence or pictures of Christ would help them to better connect with him. Without that tangible evidence, however, they're not sure they can really believe.

In today's gospel, we meet two figures walking on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. It is Easter Sunday morning, three days after the crucifixion and death of Jesus. One of the men was named Cleopas and the other remains anonymous. As disciples of Jesus, they followed him for months or perhaps years. We might presume that they invested everything in him. They gave up their jobs and maybe left their families (at least for a while) to unite themselves with the mission of Jesus. But all that came to a screeching halt as they witnessed Christ's crucifixion and his being placed in a tomb.

As Cleopas and his companion were walking together and reminiscing about Jesus, Jesus began walking with them. It never dawned on the disciples that this new companion was Jesus. Together, the group recalled what the scriptures said about the Messiah and thought that Jesus was the Chosen One. That hope was dashed, however, with his death.

While the disciples didn't recognize Jesus, their hearts were burning with faith and love as this mysterious figure explained the scriptures to them. As they walked, afternoon turned to evening. Evening, incidentally, was the time of day the early Christians usually celebrated the Eucharist. The disciples asked this unknown figure to join them for dinner. Jesus remained with them. And when he took bread, said the blessing, broke it and gave it to them, their eyes were open. They recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread. These are the same actions Christ performed at the Last Supper just a few nights before.

This encounter was so real and profound for the two disciples that they rushed back to Jerusalem to tell the Apostles and the

disciples gathered in the Upper Room that Jesus was alive. He had risen from the dead.

This gospel succinctly depicts the celebration of the Mass which Catholics have practiced for 2,000 years. At the beginning of this passage, the disciples gathered together. They shared their fears and their worries. At every Mass, we gather together. There is strength in numbers as we pour out our hopes and dreams, our disappointments and fears, before the Lord.

As the story continues, the disciples were discussing the Hebrew scriptures. As they did so, Jesus was present with them. And Jesus, unrecognizable at the time, explained the meaning of the scriptures to them and how the Christ was the fulfillment of those scriptures. When we hear the readings proclaimed at Mass, they are not just stories about God. Rather, in the scriptures God speaks to us, here and now. God has a word of compassion or challenge for us. While we can't see God, as the disciples didn't recognize the presence of the Messiah among them, we are assured that Christ is truly present to us at Mass.

When the disciples gathered around the supper table, Christ gave thanks, blessed the bread, broke it and gave it to them to eat. It was at that moment that they recognized Christ as really and truly present with the disciples. At Mass, we experience the same thing. When the priest gives thanks, says the blessing, and breaks the bread, Christ is really and truly present with us in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

One of the great Church teachings goes like this: when a priest baptizes, it is Christ who is really baptizing. When the priest

celebrates the Eucharist, it is really Christ who is celebrating the Eucharist. At Mass and when we celebrate the sacraments we really and truly encounter Christ. We encounter the Christ born in Bethlehem. We encounter the Christ who healed the sick and raised the dead. We encounter the Christ who celebrated the Last Supper and washed the feet of the disciples. We encounter the Christ who suffered and died on Calvary. And we encounter the Christ risen from the dead.

These encounters are real and are life-changing. They connect us in a very personal way with the living and resurrected Jesus.

As we continue with this celebration of Mass today, may we acknowledge and profess that Christ is present in our gathering. He is here among us since he tells us, “where two or more are gathered in my name, there I am among them.” May we acknowledge Christ who speaks to us when the scriptures are proclaimed. May our hearts be touched by his presence and grace. May we acknowledge the very presence of Christ in the Eucharist we receive. And may we be inspired by what we encounter and receive. It is this living and real encounter and the gift we receive as we connect with Christ that enables us to go out into the world to share the Good News of the resurrected Christ with others – like those disciples did as they traveled from Emmaus back to Jerusalem.

Amen? Amen!