

Notice that this morning on the Road to Emmaus we have added three crosses to the right of the path. And we have added to the words “Sorrow, Scripture and Sacred History” the word “Sacrifice.”

A biblical and systematic theology of the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross is at the very heart of the gospel and of the Christian faith. It underscores the necessity of atonement for the forgiveness of our sins. Today, I want us to focus on Christ’s death from the perspective of Jesus as the one who suffers *for* us and suffers *with* us.

On the Cross we see Jesus sharing in our trouble and pain. In so doing, a number of things happen:

- Our suffering becomes more bearable (Hebrews 4:14-16).
- Our suffering begins to take on purpose or meaning (2 Corinthians 1:3-7; Philippians 1:12-14) and...
- In light of the sacrificial death of Jesus, our pain mysteriously contributes to the work of our redemption (Romans 8:28; 1 Peter 3:13-18).

This does not, of course, minimize the emotional weight and the physical pain of suffering. We should all bear this in mind and remain sensitive to others and compassionate towards their suffering. However, the message I bring to you is that Jesus’ suffering places our suffering and hurts in a completely new light. Which means that Jesus can surprise us as we walk our own Emmaus road. There’s even a thread of comedy that runs through the resurrection of Jesus as it is related in the Gospels. And Luke 24 is no exception.

What do joke-lovers and junkies have in common? According to researchers, they’re both responding to the same kind of “high.” *Time* magazine says that a 2011 research study led by Oxford University’s Robin Dunbar included a series of experiments—both in the lab and at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival—to tease out the effect of laughter on people’s ability to withstand pain. The study suggests that genuine laughter releases *endorphins* in the brain, chemicals that activate the same receptors as drugs like heroin that produce pain-killing and euphoric effects. Previous research linked hearty ha ha ha’s with pain relief.

Watching comedy videos, for example, has been shown to decrease hospital patients’ need for opioid painkillers. But it wasn’t clear whether it was laughter itself or the person’s general positive emotions that were responsible for relieving pain. In one experiment, researchers compared the effect of watching funny videos with watching feel-good ones, such as a nature video from the series *Planet Earth*. Turns out, it’s the laughter, not the positive emotion, that brings relief from pain. Who knew *The Three Stooges* were therapeutic? By the way, anybody know how you kill a circus? Go for the juggler, of course!

Back to our story... Two disciples are walking toward home from Jerusalem. So much has happened in that city in the space of several days, but the culmination was Jesus, nailed to the cross, dead and buried. With his last breath, their hope also died. They saw his lifeless body on the cross; they knew it had been placed in a borrowed tomb. All that was left for them was to brush aside crazy reports that he was alive again, and trudge their weary way back to Emmaus.

So where's the comedy in this? It begins with the appearance of a mysterious stranger who walks alongside them, a fellow traveler. Totally unawares he jumps into their conversation. They explain what's eating away at them, astounded that he knows nothing about this turn of events. The pair trudges on, talking about how their hope had been in that man Jesus. But they stunningly fail to recognize the face of the one who walks beside them.

There's plenty of road still left to travel, so the stranger launches into a Bible study with the two travelers. The Scriptures don't just promise a Messiah, he says, but a *suffering* Messiah who must be killed before he can enter into glory. The stranger presents this Messiah as central to the entire story of the Bible. The couple listens with increasing interest. Did this happen only once, on the road to Emmaus on a spring day after the original Easter? Or does it happen repeatedly, in the course of your life and my life?

Our destination may not be Emmaus, but often enough we walk our own trail of tears. We may not have been inside Jerusalem and seen Jesus crucified, but something happens that shatters our faith, breaks our hope, or violates our love. We walk home again, retreating like a defeated army. We don't want a home so much as a place to hide, where we can lick our wounds and turn our backs on life. Yes, each of us walks a trail to tears from time to time. Sometimes we walk alone, sometimes together, but always driven by our pain.

Then something funny happens. Jesus appears beside us. But we don't even recognize him! He looks so ordinary. Just another traveler made weary by the road. Somehow he gets in the middle of our conversation, and hears what we have to say, the load of grief we spout. His response is not rejection. Nor is it sympathy, like a patting of our hand. Jesus takes the situation, and hoists it up to a new level. There's more going on than meets the eye, he tells us. Our afflictions belong to a larger picture, some deeper mystery. Like the Messiah's death, our sufferings do not have the last word, but point beyond themselves.

At one time or another, we all walk a trail of tears, the road back to Emmaus. We want to go and hide, lick our wounds, and nurse our cynical thoughts. But there on the road a stranger joins us. Do we see him? And if so, do we welcome him? Hear his message? Answer his questions? Recognize him for who he is?

Jesus seeks to present our story here and now as he presents his own on the original Emmaus road. He wants to reveal our pain and suffering for what it is: not the final word, not meaningless pain, but rather the prelude to an incessantly bright light and unending glory—which is our own resurrection.

Jesus walks with us in our sorrows. He tells us that the God who was at work in his life, leading him from a cross to a throne, gave his terrible suffering a redemptive purpose. This same God is at work in our lives as well, making sense out of that which seems senseless to us.

Our achievements, failures, mistakes and injuries—none of these is the final report on who we are, and none is without significance. Instead, they are filthy rags, scraps of material, which in our hands look worthless, but taken up by the Son of God are precious, and woven into a tapestry that glimmers with gold thread and a multitude of colors.

This God that Jesus told his disciples all about refuses to stop with the resurrection of Jesus. There is OUR resurrection to accomplish as well, not only after this world is done, but in all the little Easters along our span of life.

Our experience in worship trains us for our experience in life. Here we learn to recognize the Jesus pattern found in the Scripture's sacred story: the presence of Jesus in the broken bread, for instance. Everything in worship points us to his presence and his pattern. But this recognition does not stop at the church door. We go forth from here equipped to find the pattern of Jesus and his presence in the world for which he died—the world where he is risen to life.

We find him *there* because we find him *here*. We baptize people into the death and resurrection of Jesus so they may find him, crucified and risen, not only at the end of time, but throughout their living years. *Recognizing* Jesus as he walks beside them every day, *seeing* Jesus at the breaking of their life's bread, *sensing* Jesus sitting beside their hospital bed—we can then encourage this *recognition and seeing and sensing* in others and in our children.

Dare to leave this place, my friends, dare to go forth from here, where you encounter the Risen Christ in Word and Sacrament, and recognize that he is alive *out there* in the world for which he died.

When you must walk your Emmaus road, believing him dead and your hope seems dead with him, dare to recognize him—a stranger walking beside you, a stranger who offers you broken bread, who lifts from you your burden of hopelessness with his hands marked with wounds from the cross.

And once you recognize him, knowing that the blazing fire of his love lights the flames of our hearts, and once the great cosmic comedy has made you laugh out loud; begin to run, run through the dark, sad night of this world; run like a fool for God, and let others know from where your joy comes: that the Lord has risen and you are alive with his resurrection life.

Viktor Frankl, who you've heard me talk about before, was an Austrian psychiatrist who was imprisoned by the Nazis in a number of gruesome concentration camps during World War II. During his imprisonment Frankl treated fellow prisoners and observed that those who had a purpose in life also found the determination to survive the nightmarish ordeal of the camps. After the war he developed a theory in his counseling practice, helping clients work through their difficulties by discerning their purpose in life. Frankl taught them to discover meaning in the very suffering and pain they were facing.

Because living in and for Jesus is the fundamental purpose of our lives, we too are encouraged to discern what God is up to whenever we face suffering. In the pews next to you on Sunday morning are people who are experiencing hardships and burdens, as we all do. When suffering, troubles and sorrow come, I'm discovering that the most important question to ask is not "Why is God letting this happen to me?" but, "How is God at work in the circumstances of my life? What might God be doing in my heart through this dark valley?"

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In light of the suffering of Jesus, our own suffering, our own struggles, are used for the goal of our redemption—which is to ultimately give glory to God. Amen.