

Readings: Isaiah 50:4-7; Psalm 22; Phil. 2:6-11; Luke 22:14 – 23:56]

There is a popular Protestant hymn that begins, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” We will hear Jesus say on Holy Thursday this week to His Apostles, “I call you friends.” We teach this to children and we say it in devotional meditations. Of course, it’s not just the bumper stickers that make the claim; no less a resource than the Gospel of John implies that Jesus lays down His life for His friends. Yes, Jesus is OUR friend, but how well are we HIS friends?

Consider the historical friends of Jesus whose hearts are laid bare for us in the story of the Passion. One of them turns out to be his betrayer. Another denies multiple times that Jesus has ever made his acquaintance. The rest of His friends are so shaken in their faith that they make themselves scarce at the first sign of trouble. The companions of Jesus are in fact so unreliable that when it comes time for Him to carry His cross to His execution, a stranger and foreigner named Simon has to be drafted to shoulder the burden. As Matthew tells the story, Jesus is so lacking of support at His final hour that among the last words on His lips are, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

As the revolutionaries abuse Him and passersby taunt Him, only the women of Galilee stand at a distance and keep vigil with Jesus in his suffering.

If we claim to be friends of Jesus, then we have to consider seriously how the historical friends of Jesus behaved. They followed Him out of amazement, perhaps, or with hopes of bettering themselves should the tide of fortune rise with Him. Maybe in time they followed Jesus simply out of habit or because the alternative -- returning to a life of mundane fishing with no promise of glory at the end – seemed a dead-end option. If they had any convictions about Jesus or His message mixed into their motivations, these were not solid enough to withstand the threat of personal harm.

Clearly, the friends of Jesus were not an admirable bunch. Do we still want to identify ourselves among their number? Because when you think about it, Most of us are the wrong kind of friends of Jesus: the denying, betraying, cowardly kind.

No matter how pure our motivations and convictions about following Him, they are dramatically shaken whenever harsh realities impose themselves. We doubt Jesus the moment things go wrong for us: Shouldn’t this friendship shield us in some way from the dark side of life?

Doesn't our alliance with Jesus guarantee a certain tranquility and stability in our fortunes? Don't we "get" peace in our hearts, protection for our families, a blessing on our country, immunity from disease, anguish, and the power of evil?

If it wasn't true for the group that traveled with Jesus the first time, I'm not sure why we imagine it will be different for us.

If we are looking for a clearer understanding of what it means to be a true friend to Jesus, we need look no further than the first two readings. Isaiah tells us about the faithful servant of God who speaks the divine word fearlessly despite rejection and persecution. Beatings and humiliations and disgrace may result, but the true ally of God does not turn a back on the truth. Those who spent three years as the companions of Jesus seemed to be unfamiliar with this prophecy --or perhaps unconvinced by it. They liked the teaching and preaching and display of miracles, but they were unwilling to consider the ultimate cost of following Him.

The second model of friendship with Jesus is Saint Paul, who knows the cost of the gospel in his own flesh. In the Philippians hymn, he describes the glory and infamy awaiting the Messiah. One who bears the form of God takes on the form of a slave. One who contains the fullness of God is persuaded to empty himself to the point of death. The Pauline point is made: What goes down must come up in the Kingdom. The one willing to go down in humility is raised up in exaltation. It was this understanding that permitted Paul to go down, again and again, until his final martyrdom. He knew that the only way up is down.

The final example of friendship is, of course, the women of Galilee, traditionally among the "uncounted" of every crowd in ancient cultures. They stood unnoticed and irrelevant to most of the men on the scene. Silent witnesses to a great atrocity, by their presence and observation, they made the return to the tomb on Easter morning possible.

When Judas kisses Jesus in the fateful garden, Matthew alone tells us that Jesus responds with an intimate address: "Friend, do what you have come for." (The other Gospels do not use the word *friend*, and John omits the kiss altogether.) Matthew offers us a rare glimpse of the intimacy with which Jesus holds the sinner, even in the moment of love's betrayal. This bond is not shaken even when we are most false, and we can consider it an invitation to be a real friend to Jesus, as He is to us.

In the same way, we can offer our friendship to others even when they do not meet our expectations or live up to our hopes for loyalty, bravery, and integrity. The only way to accept such impossible terms for friendship, of course, is the way Jesus outlined

with His words and His life. We have to forgive those who trespass against us, just as Jesus forgives us.

Today's readings carry the sorrow of the world, as we are full of the sorrow of this Coronavirus pandemic. Some questions for reflection:

How well am I bearing this burden? In what ways does Jesus' Passion speak to that sorrow?

What injustices in my life and in the world stirs the most passion in me? Why? What can I do to confront the injustice of this pandemic? What can I do right now to contribute positively and with a spirit and words of hope?

Unlike Jesus, Who spent much of His last hours on earth in prayer, many of us forget to pray in the midst of a crisis. What role, if any, has prayer played for me in my hour of need?

Jesus offered himself completely for me. Am I willing to do the same for others -- no strings attached?

So, being a friend of Jesus means that I am committed to keeping God before me and taking up my cross each day. It's true that by following Jesus, I must bear ridicule, swallow my pride, go against the status quo, fight social injustice, show extreme mercy, and, all in all, do things that do not come easy for me. But, the Good News is: I will save my soul in the process. Better that than losing my soul, which, as Jesus showed us, is a fate worse than death -- even death on a cross.

We adore You O Christ and we bless You, because by Your Holy Cross, You have redeemed the world, and will redeem it again! AMEN!

[Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14; Psalm 116; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 12:1-15]

Before entering the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D. C., visitors pass by a prominent sign that reads, "Think about what you saw." Far from merely being a catchy slogan, the sign is a call to action. "Think about what you saw" calls visitors to remember the past and let it shape the future. In that way, the Holocaust Museum remains a LIVING memorial, a means to preserve the memory of the victims, while calling this and future generations out of passivity and into action.

This Holy Week, this Sacred Triduum, this Holy Thursday, in a sense is a contemporary Holocaust. Only the enemy is not a human alliance. It is a virus that invades, imprisons us, and takes our health and our lives. The next generation will have a story to tell THEIR children and grandchildren. And we are living that new reality now.

Tonight's First Reading gives us all the essentials of the Passover or Seder Meal. Among the many striking features of the Seder are two. The first is the "NOW" of the Passover Meal. Orthodox Jews do not simply remember what happened in the past. Speaking the words of what happened in the past makes the action real in the PRESENT. They are not merely remembering the Passover -- they ARE doing the Passover right now!

The words of their prayers speak of this: "Let all who ARE hungry come and eat. Let all who ARE in need come and celebrate Passover... This year we ARE slaves: next year we are free!" Secondly, the dismissal at the end of the Passover meal ends with the well-known words: "Next year in Jerusalem!" It speaks of the hope that one day all will return to the mother land -- or better put -- the Holy Land. Some think this will happen at Armageddon. We believe otherwise. When the Church is united at last, all will be "in Jerusalem."

Tonight, we gather in our homes but united in Spirit to celebrate the Supper of the Lord, a living memorial that puts us smack dab into the present moment of our lives. Like our Jewish ancestors, we simply do not remember and retell the story: In speaking the words, we are in the PRESENT MOMENT of the REAL PRESENCE: "This IS my Body... This IS my blood." "Do this (NOW) in remembrance of Me."

As Moses received his instructions from his God, we receive our instructions, and our shipping out orders from Jesus Christ Himself. Those orders come from the words found in tonight's Gospel: "I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should do also."

Jesus, John tells us, knew that His hour had come to pass from this world to the Father. He loved His own in the world and He loved them to the end. He was fully aware of what was going to happen in the next twenty-four hours. He sheds the signs of prestige and position in society, and washes the feet of His disciples.

Are you aware, my friends, that whenever you enter a church for Mass, you are in this awesome mystery NOW? From the moment you sit yourself within those hallowed walls, you put yourselves into the middle of this "holy mess!"

You come to the Supper of the Lord virtually and by means of social media with tired eyes and weary bodies. You come with your genuine concerns and cares about work, or the lack of it; health, or the lack of it; love, or the lack of it. You come spiritually to the table of the Supper of the Lord, in Word and in Sacrament, to be inspired, to be given hope, to be nourished. And then, like our pilgrim ancestors in Egypt, you are ready to leave this place at a moment's notice.

And where are you headed? When you receive the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ, you receive it not from me, but from Him in Whose place I stand as an "Alter Christus" -- "Another Christ." As Jesus handed a morsel of bread to Judas Iscariot, who turned traitor, and to Peter, who denied Him, and to the other ten seated around Him, Jesus Christ hands you His very Self for your nourishment and strength. For your peace. For your salvation.

Think about what you saw. Think about what you see when you come to Mass. Let that guide you to where you are headed. To betrayal and to denial, or to fraternal love, ministry and service. When we leave at the end of Mass, let us be fully aware of what is going to happen to us, or totally without a clue, letting Jesus Christ guide us to wash some feet. The feet of those who have lost their homes and jobs. The feet of those who are mentally or physically challenged. To wash the feet of those who are broken and broken-hearted, or who are strangers and aliens in our land.

Christ's death and rising is a grace that should shape every day of our lives, and above all in these days. In this time of trial, we are called to seize the grace of showing ourselves, by the power of the Spirit of Christ, to be, like Christ, filled with faith in God's care for us. This, we will learn, is the ultimate meaning of the Eucharist. To creatively and to faithfully become the hands and feet, the eyes and the ears, the mouth and the heart of the Lord in THE world, and in OUR corner of the world. AMEN!

[Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 31; Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9; John 18:1-19:42]

Christ is Risen, So why is there a Crucifix in every church?

The Crucifixion shows us most clearly what true love looks like. I share this reflection by Matt D'Antuono, a Catholic journalist.

One of the many accusations made against the Catholic Church is that we should not have Crucifixes hanging all over the place. Jesus rose from the dead. The work is done. The Cross is empty. Why is Jesus still on the cross in every Catholic Church? Wouldn't a bare cross more gloriously proclaim the power of God in the Resurrection? As St. John Paul II said, "We are the Easter people." But if we are the Easter people, why have crucifixes?

First of all, let's be clear: Jesus rose from the dead. Nevertheless, it is still more than appropriate for us to create, venerate and meditate on images of Jesus on the Cross. I want to give a list of reasons I have come to believe that it is right to have a Crucifix in every Church. First, the Crucifixion is a tacit pledge of the resurrection.

The Crucifixion reveals the all-consuming heat of the infinite fire of divine love, the same love that creates and sustains the cosmos.

The Crucifixion is Christ's marriage bed where he was wedded to the Church (St. Augustine). The Crucifixion shows us most clearly how God loves us, not just how much, but the manner in which He loves us. Love is not just about quantity, but about quality. He is willing to suffer.

The Crucifixion shows us most clearly what true love looks like.

The Crucifixion is the redemption and transformation of suffering and death.

"The Cross is the trellis upon which grows the vine of life" (Thomas Merton). The Church Militant is a garden of many vines that are still growing.

The Crucifixion shows me how I am to take up my own cross and follow Jesus so that I, too, might grow in true life. The Crucifixion reveals to me my own sin by showing me what my sin does to an innocent victim. The Crucifixion reveals the depravity of human nature to us. A sinless human is tortured to death.

The Crucifixion is the unique word which is the wisdom and power of God (1 Corinthians 1:18). The Crucifixion is the unique Paschal sacrifice by which my sins are forgiven. The Crucifixion is the sacrifice of the New Covenant by which communion with God is restored (CCC 613).

The Crucifixion is an invitation to me to embrace my own suffering, unite it with Jesus, and offer it up.

The Crucifixion shows us the perfect example of all the beatitudes and virtues.

The Crucifixion comforts me during my sojourn in this life since I am still in need of so much healing. The Crucifixion shows me a gritty, messy, broken Savior for a gritty, messy, broken world and my gritty, messy, broken life.

The Crucifixion is the lens through which all the rest of Scripture must be read.

The Crucifixion shows me God condescending to the deepest recesses of human misery to be with us here.

The Crucifixion shows me that even the deepest darkness is not without hope.

The Crucifixion is, as St. Francis de Sales calls it, the academy of love:

“And at last, as our conclusion, the death and passion of Our Lord is the sweetest and most constraining motive that can animate our hearts in this mortal life: and it is the very truth, that mystical bees make their most excellent honey within the wounds of this Lion of the tribe of Judah, slain, rent and torn upon the Mount of Calvary. And the children of the cross glory in their admirable problem, which the world understands not: Out of death, the eater of all, has come forth the meat of our consolation; and out of death, strong above all, has come forth the sweetness of the honey of our love. O Jesus, my Savior, how love-worthy is thy death, since it is the sovereign effect of thy love!

“Mount Calvary is the mount of lovers. All love that takes not its beginning from Our Savior's Passion is frivolous and dangerous. Unhappy is death without the love of the Savior, unhappy is love without the death of the Savior! Love and death are so mingled in the Passion of Our Savior that we cannot have the one in our heart without the other. Upon Calvary one cannot have life without love, nor love without the death of Our Redeemer. But, except there, all is either eternal death or eternal love: and all Christian wisdom consists in choosing rightly.”

We adore You O Christ, and we bless You,

Because by Your Holy Cross, You have redeemed the world... and me! AMEN!

[Readings: Acts 10:34a, 37-43; Psalm 118; I Corinthians 5:6b-8; John 20:1-9]

During this time of isolation and quarantine, of Stay Home/Stay Safe and social distance, as St. Paul says, "Where sin abounds, grace far surpasses." A couple of weeks ago, I received a meditation on fear and loss from one of our parishioners. Maria LaBedz is a lector, a cantor and a catechist in our parish Faith Formation program. She sent this meditation on fear and loss, and I share it with you as part of my Easter homily, and as my Easter gift to you! Maria says this:

This is the year of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. I have never been through a pandemic. All 50 states have people who have tested positive; all states have lost people. Michigan has been under the governor's stay-at-home order since March 13, 2020. As I write this, President Trump just extended his shelter-in-place order for the entire nation.

Going out for groceries takes strength of mind and spirit. Strength of mind to push away the fears of catching this very contagious and deadly virus. Strength of spirit to walk down those aisles knowing you must do this even though you will likely cross paths with another shopper and "violate" the social distancing recommendation of having 6 feet between yourself and another person.

As in many other states, Michigan schools (K-12, universities and even seminaries) were closed effective March 13, with the hope of reopening April 6 or April 13. It is now clear that this school year will end with students completing classwork at home using available online tools to communicate with instructors and submit finished work.

Health care workers all over the world are putting their lives on the line to care for the sick and the dying; many of them have died after being infected by the invisible enemy they fought so hard to contain. People are worried about the sick, the dying, everyone who is out there fighting this virus. Everyone is mourning all the people the world has lost. Everyone is wondering if staying at home will be enough to save one from contracting COVID-19, which can invade a home by several ways.

People crave being outside and spending time with family and friends. It is at a time like this that the electronic devices help us keep in touch, but they prove inadequate compared to being in each other's presence, close enough to touch without fear. We are all wondering when this pandemic will end and when life can again be what we remember before COVID-19.

It is an understatement to say that life as we know it is almost unrecognizable. Yes, the buildings are still there, the landmarks of daily life still stand, and people still exist, albeit in isolation and quiet concern.

This is Lent at its most spiritually painful. There is pain, suffering, isolation, worry, fear, a battle for life, a quest for light amidst the darkness of escalating numbers of people with the virus and the painful news that more have died.

This is our time in the “desert”, searching for strength to take the next step and not let fear overwhelm us and deprive us of the God-given ability to work based on reason; to work based on faith.

At a time when we most need to come together and lift our voices in prayer as a family, we have nowhere to go. Even the churches are closed.

We know that we still have Jesus, that God will always lovingly hold us in His hand. But the human mind is frail, and the human spirit is attacked from everywhere when something like this happens. We need the tangible; we need the Presence. The separation from family and friends is made even more painful by our separation from the Lord’s Presence in the Eucharist.

It is at a time like this that we realize many things: The Holy Eucharist gives us strength. The Church is our family. Physical separation cannot separate us from the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We can still lift our voices in prayer as God’s family as we participate in Masses remotely. We are still and always will be One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic church.

We may be “meeting” and worshipping in the “catacombs” of our homes, but that is only temporary. I pray that God will keep us strong and protect us from despair even if we may be among the saints called to suffer and die during this time.

When we emerge, I pray that the Lord will give us an even brighter faith, filled with breath of the Holy Spirit, the Life of the Church. I pray for a faith that will bind us together as God’s family, rejoicing in His Light and doing His work.

On the calendar, Easter Sunday falls on April 12. No one knows if the churches will be open by then so we can celebrate in the manner we have been accustomed to. We must remember this: Even if we have to celebrate Christ’s triumph over sin and death still away from those we love, Christ’s victory is not diminished. His triumph is forever. So, we may be celebrating two Easters this year, the second celebrated on the day we can freely come out into the sunlight and visit God in His house. May that second Easter be one that remains in our souls as the beacon towards which we carry our

crosses in this journey, and may it remain with each of us as a reminder that with God, nothing is impossible.

Thank, you Maria, for your moving and inspiring words! Now here are mine...

As someone who has a tendency to anticipate problems, I often struggle with discouragement. Remaining positive in the face of adversity is not something that comes naturally to me. To give you an idea, I'm not the kind of person who automatically looks at the rain pouring down and gives thanks to God for allowing the crops to grow.

Although I'd rather not admit it, my first reaction to rainy days is often one of sadness. I am very good at focusing on the clouds and ignoring the sun that shines above the clouds. My best priest friend reminds me of the gift I have to find the dark cloud behind every silver lining!

The Good News is that, with the help of God's grace, I have learned to respond differently to the unpleasant circumstances of life and you can too. This is the true gift of this most unusual and extraordinary Lenten season. It all starts with the empty tomb.

Because we're looking back with two thousand years of hindsight, it's sometimes difficult for us to appreciate the greatness of the Lord's Resurrection. From the time I was a young child, I knew that Jesus was crucified, died and rose from the dead on the third day. It was a historical fact, plain and simple. George Washington was the first president of the United States, Pearl Harbor was bombed on Dec. 7, 1941 and Jesus Christ rose from the dead. Case closed. But consider for a minute what it must have been like for the first disciples.

Even though Jesus prophesied that He "must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (Matthew 15:21), many of His followers were filled with grief and hopelessness when faced with the empty tomb. For them, it was a sign of failure and disappointment. Contemplating His lifeless body and an empty tomb brought about feelings of hopelessness. The Savior of the world was dead and all hope was gone.

According to the Bible (John 20:1-10), Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early on the first day of the week (while it was still dark) and saw that the stone had been rolled away. She ran and got Peter and John and reported that, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." After confirming that the Lord's body was indeed missing, the disciples went back to their homes. What about Mary?

But Mary stood weeping outside of the tomb, and as she wept she stopped to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him." (John 20:11-13)

Before I ruin the suspense and tell you that Jesus is about to appear to the grieving woman, let's examine some facts. Mary was at the tomb because she desired to anoint the body of Jesus (Mark 16:1) who, in her mind, was dead. Upon finding the tomb empty, she began to weep because she assumed that someone had taken the body. She felt extremely sad and hopeless. Not only was Jesus dead, but His body was missing.

Just like Mary Magdalene, we often get into trouble by looking at a negative situation and assuming the worst. If we're not careful, our emotions can overtake us and lead to hopelessness. Just because you feel that you are doomed or that a situation is hopeless doesn't make it true. Simply put, feelings are not facts. Understanding this concept is the secret to living in peace. Failing to grasp it is guaranteed to make you miserable.

The tomb was empty because Jesus rose from the dead, as He promised. In her grief, Mary Magdalene somehow missed the point.

The two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35) and the Apostles hiding in fear (John 20:19) provide additional examples of individuals who were sad and afraid because they couldn't believe that Jesus actually rose from the dead. They couldn't get past the horror of the Crucifixion and the empty tomb.

Very much like you and me, these followers of Christ ignored the one piece of evidence that should never be ignored. No matter how many "impossible" problems and obstacles are staring you in the face, don't believe your feelings when they try to tell you that there is no hope. Jesus Christ is risen from the dead and all of the feelings of fear, sadness and hopelessness experienced by Mary Magdalene, the disciples and you and I don't change a thing. Think about the empty tomb. It is empty and the body of Jesus is missing, but that is because the greatest event imaginable has taken place. Jesus Christ has conquered death and rose from the dead. If He can do that, anything is possible!

"Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how He told you, while He was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be

delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and on the third day rise?" (Luke 24:5-7)

HE IS RISEN! ALLELUIA! Proclaim this Good News, this GREAT News!
AMEN!

[Readings: Acts 2:42-47; 5:12-16; Ps. 118; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31]

(Parts of this homily are taken from a reflection by Gretchen R. Crowe, editorial director for periodicals at OSV.)

“When we get back to normal.”

It’s the clause that we all seem to be thinking, saying, praying these days. Even with Lent behind us, the pall of sacrifice can’t help but continue to hang over our heads and our hearts.

Each of us probably has a “back to normal” list. Back to Mass, certainly. Back with our extended family. Maybe a trip back to a favorite restaurant, a night out back at the movies or a gathering back with a book club or a choir.

It’s only natural. We are longing to return to what once was. We are aching for the familiar, the planned, and the ordered. We are waiting to hit “play” on our “paused” lives, to pick things back up from where we left off.

But it has struck me throughout all of this, as it’s no doubt struck many of you, that maybe the Lord is telling us through this strange time of global pandemic that what, for many of us, has become “normal” isn’t good enough anymore.

This might look different for each one of us. Perhaps we have come to normalize convenience, waste, laziness or extravagance. Perhaps our normal has come to mean overly busy schedules, limited family time or little prayer time. Perhaps we have become a slave to routine, to checking boxes, to plans, to control. This is the temporal baggage that comes with being human. As flawed beings prone to sin and selfishness, we create “normals” that, in the end, aren’t all that good for us.

We chase dreams centered on professional success, financial gain, outward beauty, and the opinions of others, our own self-importance, or any other number of red herrings. And when they are suddenly pulled from us, when we are forced to slow down, we feel loss. But loss, in some ways, might be just what we need. For the Lord might be telling us: “Slow down; those things don’t matter; your priorities are all mixed up. I made you for more than your normal.”

And he did. He made us to love him and to be with him forever in heaven. He sent his son to earth to show us a new normal — a new way of living: “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Mt 10:39).

In the busyness of our self-made normals, we forget that our every word and deed should not be centered around our wants and desires, but on those of Jesus. And his desire is for us to follow him, to love him and to strive with all our might to be with him in heaven.

We are in the midst of a tremendous challenge. This coronavirus pandemic has demanded that we completely redefine what our everyday life looks like, and it is only natural to want things to swing back into familiar territory — to return to some semblance of normal. But we are being offered an opportunity to examine our normal. To turn it upside down, to look at it from all angles, and to ask ourselves: Is this how I want to live my life? Is this how I should be living my life?

Since the onset of social distancing in mid-March, I have seen so many encouraging things. People are communicating more and appreciating one another more. They're thinking outwardly instead of inwardly. They've literally turned in jet-setting and paper-publishing for fort-building and bread-baking. I've seen more prayer, more family time and more concern for others. Even in this time away from Mass, I believe there has been a deeper cultivation of appreciation for the Eucharist. I'm sure you've seen it, too.

Let's not forget these small graces when "we get back to normal."

Things are not normal in today's Gospel. The Apostles are huddled in the Upper Room two days after the execution of their Lord and Teacher. They fear that the Roman soldiers and the Jews will find them and kill them as well. They did not pass the "Courage Test" in the Garden of Gethsemane. They fled like scared rabbits and were nowhere to be found near the Holy Cross. They left it up to two old men, a couple of ladies, and the youngest man in their troupe to do the dirty work of burying the body.

No, it was not normal in the Upper Room. Nor was it normal when their Lord and Teacher, last seen dead and buried, makes His walks through a locked and solid door. His message is not one of disappointment or vengeance. Jesus will not talk down to them and judge them. Instead, He greets them with words of peace. He breathes on them the Holy Spirit. He forgives them and gives them the power to forgive others.

Every year, on this Sunday, the first Sunday after Easter, we celebrate God's mercy, which is greater than any sin we may ever commit.

This feast day, known as Divine Mercy Sunday, was established 20 years ago by Pope St. John Paul II and is observed by Catholics all over the world. The inspiration for Divine Mercy Sunday can be found in the diaries of St. Faustina Kowalska, a Polish nun who experienced apparitions of Jesus in the 1930's and recorded his messages. "My daughter," Jesus told her, "say that I am love and mercy personified."

During the canonization of St. Faustina on April 30, 2000, Pope John Paul II proclaimed that the first Sunday after Easter "will be called 'Divine Mercy Sunday.'" He also named St. Faustina the "apostle of Divine Mercy" and urged everyone to make her "beautiful exclamation your own, 'Jesus, I trust in you!'" Five years later, on the vigil of Divine Mercy Sunday in 2005, Pope John Paul II died. He was beatified on Divine Mercy Sunday in 2011 by Pope Benedict XVI. On Divine Mercy Sunday in 2014, Pope Francis canonized Pope John Paul II, along with Pope John XXIII.

No, it was not normal in the Upper Room. And it cannot be "normal" in our lives anymore. We may have to suffer through various trials to prove our genuine faith. And that Kingdom of teaching and communal life, breaking of the bread and prayers, needs being perfectly met, sincerity of heart, praising, enjoying favor with all people, will become a reality in this world and beyond! AMEN!

[Readings: Acts 2:14, 22-33; Psalm 16; 1 Peter 1:17-21; Luke 24:13-35]

The story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus is the story of the Christian life. These disciples were walking away from Jerusalem and the apostolic faith community in defeat and dejection. They had lost hope. We too, have moments of despair and desolation.

The Risen Lord Jesus accompanies us along the road, even when we are moving in the wrong direction. Only the Lord can "break open" the Word in order to help us understand the stories of our lives, especially suffering, and read them in harmony with the pattern of the Scriptures. Only the Lord can rekindle our energy and our resolve to devote ourselves to what is most important in life.

The encounter on the road leads to the table, the breaking of the bread and the total gift of self. Recognition of the Risen Lord is always linked with the Eucharist. At the heart of our Christian life is this meal of Word and Eucharist which we celebrate every Sunday. The Risen Lord presides over all our journeys, wishing to set our hearts on fire in generous service to all people in need, near and far. The gift we have received is the gift we share. Humbly, we set out on the various roads of our lives to respond to all the hungers of the human family.

The account of Jesus' presence with the two confused, troubled disciples on the road to Emmaus is a graced opportunity for us, in the midst of this moment when we wish we could be somewhere else and in some other time.

How many of us, and how often, have we been inclined or tempted to think the coronavirus has frozen us in place? We're locked in our homes, and we might think this puts a stop to our unleashing the Good News. What if, on the contrary, we see ourselves in the two disciples on the road OUT of Jerusalem, away from the small community of Jesus' friends and followers, on whatever errand led them to Emmaus?

So, does that change our approach to life? It should! You and I are like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. They were engaged in a lively discussion about the past three days. THE Three Days: Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday over to Easter Sunday. The FIRST time around!

In the course of their lively discussion, Jesus shows up and walks with them. At first, He is seen as a stranger.

What follows in the following chapters gives no doubt that Jesus not only "appeared to appear" but that He DID appear to them and He DOES to us!

Note that they were going AWAY from the danger of Jerusalem to the safety and security of their home. Note, too that Emmaus is described as being "seven miles away." The actual town of Emmaus is really eleven or twelve miles away from Jerusalem, but Luke uses the

perfect Biblical number to make a point: Jesus meets us at the perfect time and at the perfect place, right where we are supposed to meet Him.

And if it seems that Jesus wants to keep going, we don't let Him. We invite Him in. We invite Him into our hearts. "The sun is going down, Lord, it is almost night. It's soon going to be that time when robbers and vandals and murderers claim the road. Be with us, stay with us, and keep us safe with You to protect us." And Jesus agrees. He enters. Jesus does not push Himself onto us. Jesus always waits for our invitation.

The Easter faith of the two travelers to Emmaus doesn't result from examining an empty tomb. It comes from meeting Jesus Christ on the way, from hearing Him speak and interpret His Holy Word to them, and from His sharing a meal with them. Here we find the echoes of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' miraculous feedings of the multitudes and His giving of Himself to the Apostles at the Last Supper.

And when the two disciples have an "aha" moment, they recognize that Jesus HAS risen from the dead. The Jesus they knew before Sunday disappears. That is why He vanishes. His physical, earthly presence is no longer needed. The faith of the disciples is rekindled to the point of giving them spiritual heartburn! They forsake the danger of the night to run on the road and tell the other disciples in Jerusalem what they have witnessed. It cannot wait until morning. It must be proclaimed, it must be shouted in the dangerous darkness. Here we see what Jesus does for us, here and now, in this Eucharistic celebration. As Jesus broke open the Word to His disciples, we have the Word of God explained to us during this Liturgy of the Word. As Jesus takes bread, blesses it, breaks it and gives it to the disciples, so He does for us today and every time we gather in His name in this Most Holy Eucharist. This is how YOU and I come to Easter faith!

For Jesus, it was not his re-appearance as the defeated prophet or the pretend Messiah. This is the Risen Lord, glorified and barely recognizable by those who knew Him best and who loved Him the most. How could His disciples have missed recognizing Him? More importantly, why do WE miss it?

The disciples make up for it. They head back to Jerusalem. They forsake the dangerous dark of night. They can't wait. They were slow to "get it" on the road to Emmaus. Now they are racing to tell the others what they saw, what they learned, and what they felt. We are the modern, joy-filled disciples, called to strive, to celebrate and to serve. Jesus once again explains the Scriptures to the disciples on the road to Emmaus. He breaks bread and reveals Himself to them. He loves them right until the very end of HIS sojourn. And He loves us to the end of ours. ALLELUIA! AMEN!