

### **3 Easter (A)**

April 26, 2020

*And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them. Mark 16:13*

If it had been left up to the disciples described in the Gospel of Mark, I'm not sure if we would ever have heard of the Resurrection!! There's a whole lot of doubt going on here! And the account we've just read is the second (and possibly the third) attempt at getting it right. The original ending to Mark's Gospel reads (are you ready?!) " They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

Afraid? That's it? Is there a page missing here? Is it a bad translation? The early church seemed just as confused as we are, which is why later scribes saw fit to add on entirely new material to the original narrative, in an effort to provide a storyline consistent with what people had come to believe. It was an effort, frankly, to clean up the record. (Granted, the part about handling snakes may have been going too far, but they must have felt they were on a roll!)

Still, that's the whole point, isn't it? It was just a matter of editing after the fact. For Mark's church already believed that Christ was raised. It already was living out the fruits of that Resurrection in its daily life. There was no doubt anymore, only certainty, and enough courage to go with it, so as to withstand the persecutions going on (we think) at the time this Gospel was first proclaimed.

Oh, believers were still afraid for their lives (who wouldn't be?); but fear did not consume or define them not when the Risen Christ had indeed appeared to his followers (although, according to Mark, they seemed intent on denying it); and not when that same Christ had appeared in their individual hearts and in the heart of their sacred community, in the real time of ministry and fellowship. So they could endure and prevail over anything and everything, even over death, because Christ had done the same.

We find ourselves, I think, in at least a similar situation. It's not that we doubt that Christ is risen; it's that we wonder whether our belief in his rising is strong enough to sustain us through these our own perilous and uncertain times. We wonder if our fears not unlike those of the first disciples are somehow stronger and, if you will, more believable than what deep down we know to be true. Sometimes I think that the first casualty in a crisis such as this is memory. It's forgetting all the ways that God through Christ has nourished us; all the ways he has appeared to us unannounced, and maybe unsought, at our moments of greatest need; all the ways he has shown us a new reality, a new future that was as yet invisible, or remote beyond our imagining.

I've started to watch and enjoy again Ken Burns' documentary of several years ago on the Roosevelts. In it he chronicles the personal lives and public careers of members of perhaps America's most famous family. Right now the focus is on FDR's protracted struggle with polio a battle (the series is quick to point out) that physically he never actually won. The use of his legs never returned (not in the least). After being first afflicted, he would never walk without assistance again. He wanted to, he believed he could. He projected apparently such a sense of conviction that some people who met him in the White House remember him standing to greet them. He never stood on his own, ever.

Yet still it can be said that Franklin Roosevelt conquered polio by refusing to allow neither the pain nor the despair which accompanies that dread disease spiritually to consume him; and his

confidence appears to have been almost hypnotic. Nor finally did it prevent him from going onto to lead his nation through a crippling depression and, later, through a world war.

According to historian Geoffrey Ward who co-wrote the program and who himself was paralyzed as an adult with polio-like symptoms FDR remained always afraid of falling; but it never stopped him from striving. That was the difference. It never stopped him from imagining a rising road (FDR's words) a goal, a hope, a promise stretching out before him, something he might never fully achieve, but which would prove nonetheless fulfilling in its very effort. When he said famously that 'the only thing we have to fear is fear itself' he was speaking of some of the same terrors that he knew very well and sought all his life to overthrow.

This idea of a rising road would go on to characterize a country's hopes and dreams as much as his own. Translated in the language of Christian faith, it might mean simply our unquestioning trust in a God whose designs we cannot yet clearly determine but which we can know, with utter certainty, will lead upward to strength and health, as they will lead to a stronger awareness in us (as it did for Roosevelt) of our one great purpose in life, our moral duty to a suffering world.

St. Mark might have wished he had revised his own first ending of the Gospel that bears his name. Even in his own day he must have known that it was as incomplete as it was inaccurate. For the plain truth is that, if Jesus' disciples started out afraid, they didn't stay afraid! You and I gathered here, on this third Sunday of Easter, over two thousand years later, are living proof that someone somehow somewhere along the way swallowed their fear. Someone spoke, someone proclaimed, someone risked life and limb in the name and for sake of the Risen Christ. Someone chose, by grace, to seek that 'rising road' the way that conquers fear and establishes love and puts death to flight.

In these dark days, as in every day, let that road, that spirit, that rising be our own. Amen.

Many Blessings—and a Happy, Holy Eastertide!  
Fr. Gordon+