

**Second Sunday of Easter
April 11, 1999**

By Father Charles Bowes

**Acts of the Apostles 2:42-47
1 Peter 1:3-9
John 20:19-31**

We enter and dwell within the glorified wounds of Jesus.

“They held all things in common,” says Acts 2. Wow! The early Easter church of faith worked wonders. These believers performed signs, prayed, shared everything, heaped generosity, worked hard everyday, praised God, and won new recruits. They even got along with each other, judging from the accounts of chapter 2 of Acts. Later chapters to come, however, prove that the long labor of faith was only beginning. It was not all sweetness and light.

No doubt it is those rosy pictures of the first Christians that dominate our minds when we think that, if we were really a people of faith, everything would be hunky-dory. We “people of God” would behave and perform far better than we seem to be doing. We would also be more impressive, “winning the approval of all,” as the early Church did. Well, we are not getting much approval – neither from the world around us nor from each other.

The same gap between expectation and performance appears in our individual personal lives. One would think that we would be doing marvels if we really had faith. There would not be so much confusion in our lives. We would not be contentious. We would pray more and hurt

less. We would not be so haunted by doubts. We would be happy. We’d be nicer. Life would not be so daunting.

We presume that faith, like love, should make things easy, even effortless. We imagine that if we really believed in and loved God, we would, in the words of the first letter of Peter, chapter 1, “rejoice with inexpressible joy.” Love is supposed to feel good, at least so say the songs. And you’d think that faith would make things a little less arduous and more fulfilling.

Well, I have now begun to think otherwise. The philosopher Immanuel Kant, among others, helped to change my mind. His view of life is not very fashionable today, but that may be because we are in such a mess. We think something is drastically wrong if we feel unhappy or unfulfilled. Kant, on the other hand, thought that feeling good or being fulfilled have little or nothing to do with ethics and moral goodness. What counted for Kant was whether we were doing what we knew was right. Ease and inclination had nothing to do with it. After all, what really tests and shows the moral character of a person? Telling the truth when it is fulfilling and easy, or when it is difficult and daring? Where is the greater moral work to be found? In a faithful spouse who enjoys being faithful, or in a faithful spouse who finds it difficult?

I don’t mean to imply, even if Kant may have, that a thing is good only if it is painful – no. But there is a wisdom in seeing that there is more to goodness, love and

faith than the feeling of success or fulfillment that may accompany them. Perhaps a parent's greatest love for a child appears more in the hard times than the happy times. Perhaps a friend's trust in me is more deeply felt when inclination is otherwise than when it seems effortless.

What I'm getting at is this: admittedly, the delight, the "inexpressible joy," is part of Easter faith. But our faith in the Risen Lord is revealed in sad and troubling moments as well - in the glorified wounds of Jesus Christ.

The Twelve, remember, were locked in. They were in fear; there was a lack of peace; perhaps there was confusion, pain, and division. It is into that unsettled disquiet that Jesus came. Even then the apostles were not able to experience wholly the joy of his presence without entering the mystery of his wounds. Once they saw his hands and side, the remnants of pain and sorrow, then, they could rejoice.

The experience of faith is not the absence of pain or sorrow or loss. It is, rather, the bearing of pain or sorrow in faith. Faith does not take away the wounds; it transforms them. Remember, Jesus grows no older but is forever fixed in a death to the old from which he will never recover...fixed in the glory of passing through the wounds of death into new life. In faith, flaws are not obliterated; they are refined and purified.

Thomas, still hanging around the community of faith, discovers Christ in his unbelief. Although they kept telling Thomas - it went on for a week - that Jesus had risen, he refused to believe. "I'll not believe" (without entering the wounds.) How right he was. Faith must be found as much in the wounds of life as in the glories. And from the wounds a faith might amazingly emerge. "My Lord and my God," that skeptic is reported to have said. But there is more to this story - something specifically for us - that while Thomas became a believer in the seeing, those, you and me, who do not have the joy of seeing offer something far more splendid in their act

of sightless faith. We are told that Jesus did other signs. The ones Scripture records are meant to help us believe Jesus is the Messiah. That belief, that faith, is finally felt and expressed not in sheer joy alone, but in arduous trial, in the plague of worry and doubt, in the grip of fear. These lacks, these wounds, these trials, make faith shine all the more in the hearts that hold such faith more precious than gold.

This holy food, this fellowship we share, this Body of Christ we both are and become - is born of a passage through death into new life. We celebrate this.

The great film director Roberto Rossellini made a film about St. Augustine for Italian television. He has one memorable scene where Augustine is proposed to the crowd as bishop's choice for his successor. He is already well known as a scholar, philosopher, and teacher. He is known to himself as a sinner, even though repentant many times. And he is aghast at the honor they would thrust upon him. He protests to the crowd of worshippers that he is unworthy and they know it; he had once taught heresy, lived with a woman, fathered a child. For him this means he is stained, a sinner, unclean. But the crowd reminds him of one more thing: he has been forgiven - he has been touched by the wounds of Jesus. "Did you not assure me," one man says to him, "would I confess to you, that God most surely takes away my sins; they don't exist any longer?" And others whom he has baptized cry out, "Did you not tell us the past is buried and we are new creatures in Christ, washed in his holy blood?"

The crowd is right, and the Holy Spirit is speaking through them as much as through the bishop. And so Augustine, humbled not only by his weakness but by God's mercy, bows to the truth.

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