



Things to Ponder

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Pain Passes, Beauty Remains (Based on Luke 24:35-48)

By Rev. Msgr. Kevin T. Hart

The great post-impressionist French painter, Henri Matisse, died in 1954 at the age of 86. In the last years of his life, arthritis crippled and deformed his hands. Even to hold a paintbrush caused him excruciating pain. And yet, he continued to paint. He would place a soft cloth between his fingers to keep the brush from slipping, and to ease just a little the pain of holding the brush. Someone asked him why he submitted his body to such suffering. Why did he continue to paint in the face of such great physical pain? Matisse replied, “The pain passes, but beauty remains.”

The story of Matisse highlights the core of the message in today's Scripture readings (Luke 24:35-48): that before Jesus could rise to glory on Easter He had first to suffer and die. “Thus it is written, that the Messiah would suffer before being raised to glory.” Elsewhere in the Gospel Jesus adds that what has happened to Him must also happen to us. “No slave is greater than his master,” Jesus says in John 15:20, “If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.” After celebrating the crucifixion of Christ on Good Friday, today's readings hammer home the point that there must be a cross in our life, and that we must pick it up and follow in the footsteps of Jesus. “No pain, no gain,” as we remind ourselves while exercising. “No cross, no glory.” Not for Jesus. And not for us.

Pain, of course, comes in many forms. Today's Gospel, depicting the Apostles gathered in the confusion and disbelief, highlights two forms of pain that all of us can identify with: the pain of guilt and the pain of fear. Perhaps one of the reasons why the Apostles were so slow to believe that Jesus had risen was that they did not want to face the consequences of His coming back to them. Just two days prior, they had all abandoned Him, deserting Him in His moment of greatest need. They were afraid to be seen with Him, even connected with Him in the minds of the Jews. Peter went so far as to deny that he had even known the man - the same Peter and the same Apostles who boasted to the Lord at the Last Supper that they would lay down their lives. If Jesus had indeed risen, what kind of treatment could they expect from Him in light of their shabby treatment of Him?

And so when Jesus appears in their midst, they had every reason to be terrified; terrified by the guilt that was oppressing them, terrified by the fear of retribution from the Lord. The Gospel says that they were “startled.” Yes, startled by the appearance of one whom they knew was dead. But they were even more startled by the first

words that Jesus addressed to them: “Peace be with you.” After all they had done and not done, they must have been amazed that Jesus’ first words meant that all is forgiven. He comes not for revenge or to chastise them. No, He comes to extend the hand of friendship, of unity, and of peace that they thought their rejection of Jesus had ruined forever.

We usually associate the Easter season simply with focusing on the resurrection of Jesus, and that His resurrection gives us every reason to believe in our own. But today’s Gospel shows us that new life and union with Christ are not something that awaits us only on the other side of the grave. New life and union with Christ come with His forgiveness in the here and now. Guilt and fear are a part of the Cross that Jesus wants to lift from our shoulders right now.

To follow Christ and to put Him at the very center of our lives is a painful process. St. Augustine puts it this way in a sermon he delivered to Catholics 1500 years ago: “You are like a piece of pottery, shaped by instruction, fired by tribulation. When you are put in the oven, therefore, keep your thoughts on the time when you will be taken out again; for God is faithful and will guard both your going in and your coming out.” Or in the words of Henri Matisse, “The pain passes, but beauty remains,” ... forever.

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