

## Third Sunday of Easter, Cycle A

Luke 24:13-35

So many rituals are going by the wayside because of the pandemic. Graduations and first communions have been cancelled or postponed. What are we to do with our joy? Many funerals are not being held and those that are have been truncated. What are we to do with our sorrow? We have lost the ability to watch the first pitch, to shop with friends, to dine at our favorite restaurant and to dance at weddings.

How significant is this loss of ritual? Our daughter Laura is an occupational therapy assistant in a skilled nursing unit. Many of the patients are unaware of the pandemic, but some of the tension has reached them. Easter Sunday, folks were agitated. So, if they were Catholic, Laura tuned their TVs to the Easter mass. Each person immediately became quiet and made the sign of the cross. The familiar ritual centered them.

Because we are embodied souls, we humans need rituals. They give us structure and meaning. Ritual actions express our values for us. E.g. We may spend the most important days of the year with our families because they are the most important people in our lives. And repeating the actions reinforces the values, increasing their importance and empowering us to live them out even more.

Psychologists are encouraging people to establish routines as a way of keeping their spirits up. I propose that you go deeper: make routines rituals. As you do them, consider what you want them to say. What is it you value? What values do you want to live out of and be strengthened by? Are the values of sports enough for you? Are the values of shopping or of being a presence on social media enough? Surely they can have a healthy place in our value system, but they are not all we are called to be.

Similarly, Jesus used rituals to tap into the deepest pools of goodness and love. He built on Jewish rituals of eating and blessing to create the Eucharist for us. When he fed 5,000, Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to the crowd. The members of the early church recognized this event as inaugurating a ritual which would sustain Christians in all ages and told about it six times in the gospels so we could not fail to notice. At the Last Supper, Jesus repeated these same four steps. In today's gospel, he repeats them again. (The ritual of course has other pieces to it, namely the Scriptures and the cup of the covenant, but we will look at just the bread here.)

- ❖ Jesus takes the bread; we take the bread. It is not something we provide ourselves. God provides us with the nourishment we need. Taking it acknowledges that we are mere creatures, provided for at every turn by the One who is the Source of Life.
- ❖ Jesus blesses the bread; we bless the bread. The Greek word *eucharist* is a translation of the Hebrew word *berakah* or blessing. Jewish life is an endless series of blessings; every moment of the day is a moment of thanks and recognition of the goodness inherent in it. Waking up – a blessing! Washing and dressing – a blessing! My work – a blessing! Our conversation – a blessing! A chair and a roof overhead – blessings! When we acknowledge the goodness, it grows.
- ❖ Jesus breaks the bread; we break the bread. We must accept the reality of life: we cannot share our gifts unless we break them. A baby is beautiful in its newness, but the wizened face of an elderly person has a depth born of sacrifice that takes us to another level of beauty. While suffering is never an end in itself, we must die to our self-centeredness so we can share love with one another. That is what breaking is. Jesus was broken by suffering out of love for us. His experience of suffering makes it possible for him to be with us in our suffering, transforming it and moving us beyond it.
- ❖ Finally, Jesus gives the bread to others; we give the bread to others. This is the mission of our lives. The brokenness is not the final step; feeding others is. We feed others the love of Jesus with food, with conversation, support, money, with our faith in them or with a path out of struggle.

The final line of today's gospel is hard as we are cut off from gathering physically to do this ritual together. How will we know Jesus in the breaking of bread when we can only watch? We thank God for the Internet, but it is not the same. Hunger is not a bad thing, however, when it gets us to reconsider our values and recommit ourselves to rituals that matter.

- ❖ What rituals have you established as you shelter in place? What values do they express?
- ❖ Spend a day blessing everyone and everything, as much as you can. What happens?