

Homily for the Third Sunday of Easter
St. Joseph's Neier May 3-4, 2014
Rev. Kevin Schmittgens

Central Idea: It is OK to let our hearts burn, it is OK not to have everything figured out, for it is that precise moment that we encounter the risen Christ.

*Then they said to each other,
"Were not our hearts burning within us
while he spoke to us on the way and opened the Scriptures to us?"*

It is an experience common to everyone, no matter what. It is the fundamental dis-ease of human existence. Every single person in this church has felt it. It is not dependant on gender, race, ideology or even sexual orientation. Believer or non-believer, Christian or atheist does not matter. Everyone goes through the same encounter, the same process, the same fire. It has been examined by the great minds who try to explain human nature: Sigmund Freud, Karl Jung, Henry David Thoreau and Steven Spielberg. It lies at the heart of all poetry, literature, art, philosophy, psychology and religion. Believe it or not I can see it as the basis of science.

As one author put it: "It has different moods and faces. Sometimes it hit us as pain – dissatisfaction, frustration and aching. At other times its grip is not felt as painful at all, but as a deep energy, as something beautiful. as an inexorable pull, more important than anything else inside us, toward love, beauty, creativity and a future beyond our limited present. Desire can show itself as aching pain or delicious hope."

He calls it the Holy Longing.

And what we do with it, how we deal with it, how we attempt to quench it, numb it or allow it to lead us makes all the difference in the world. It will lead some people to drugs and alcohol. It will lead some people to achievement and triumph. Others will get ensnared by sick and twisted cravings. Others will grow to serve others, especially those who are weakest and most vulnerable. Others will selfishly get locked into their own needs and wants, never seeing past their ego. And still others will encounter the living God.

The disciples on the road to Emmaus in our gospel this morning are feeling it. It begins as a deep pain, disappointment at the deepest level. Their Lord and Master Jesus, the one in whom they hoped, has been disgraced, condemned, convicted, executed and now tossed upon the trash heap of human history. Their dreams have been dashed, broken, shattered. And then, to make matters worse, there is talk, talk that somehow, he is alive or at least people are saying that he is. Like the families of the victims of Malaysian flight 370 or the South Korean ferry boat, the uncertainty is enough to drive them crazy.

They are in the maelstrom of that deepest and most elemental of human conditions. They are in the vortex of the Holy Longing, although it doesn't feel very holy.

Along the way to Emmaus, they encounter the Lord. He meets them, gathers with them, if you will, he shares the story with them, and then he breaks the bread with them. And when they do two things will happen: first they will recognize that their disappointment, their discontent, their disenchantment led them to that road, led them to that moment. Second, they will open their eyes to know him, the risen Christ in their midst.

We similarly learn two things. First do not fret over your frustrations, over your distress, over your setbacks and failures. What you are feeling, what you are encountering is par for the course and it is a prerequisite to discovering the fullness of life, to discovering the risen Lord. In my career as a priest, I have met many people struggling with the Holy Longing. Many felt the dis-ease, many knew frustration and distress. Some attempted to both satisfy his longing or extinguish the fire. He turned to many unhealthy things to do so. Let me say this as bluntly as possible: stifling and smothering the Holy Longing is a really, really bad idea. Finally, many rediscovered their faith. And that has made all the difference in the world.

Secondly, the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus is really about what we do here at the Eucharist. When we gather, when we tell the story, when we break the bread, our eyes, theoretically at least, are opened to the risen Christ in our midst. This doesn't happen magically or mystically, but rather it happens by paying attention to the longings deep in our heart, by sensing the holy fire that God has placed in our souls and indeed all of creation. The Holy Longing leads us to this place where we begin to understand the words of St. Augustine: *our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee, O God.*

May is always gut check time. My guess is that with less than a month left in school, there are more than a few restless hearts out there, along with some frustration, irritation and aggravation. And that is just the teachers. The key is not to ignore or douse or stifle that. Remember that's a really, really bad idea. Instead allow that dissatisfaction, that dis-ease to move you forward. As I have been telling my students, the key to greatness is being able to finish strong. Any idiot can start something. Any knucklehead can begin. It is only the tough, the resilient, the wise and the fierce who can finish well. And so I challenge all of you, finish strong. The end is in sight, now is not the time to give up and give in.

As we walk out of this church this morning, we will set our feet on a road much like the road to Emmaus. And as we walk we feel that longing, that holy fire which has haunted and inspired humans from the dawn of history. The question is what are you going to do with it, how are you going to deal with it.

Today, our Lord tells you simply: go ahead, feel the burn.