

# FROM HEARTACHE TO HEARTBURN

AN EXCERPT FROM A SERMON PREACHED THE THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTERTIDE

*Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" Luke 24:33-34*

Though I didn't rise in the middle of the night to watch the live broadcast of the pope's funeral, I'd heard, and watched and read a week's worth of news and commentary. There was the spiritual icon, and then there was the man himself whom billions called their chief shepherd, the Prince of the Church, and — in his native Poland — "Papa," and "Uncle."

There was the ecclesiastical entourage, official and unofficial spokespersons, and a smattering of theologians who tried to assess and sum up this papacy on the world's religious and geo-political stage.

And, among the millions of Catholics & non-Catholics who thronged into Rome this last week were two former U.S. presidents and one sitting president. So there was a Southern Baptist, a good 'ol Episcopalian and a born-again evangelical who paid their last respects by drawing close to the corpse of a Catholic, stretched out on a funeral bier in St. Peter's basilica for days. Before these three men lay only the earthly remains that had once held the life of a world leader; and one who had wielded a kind of holy power and authority none of them could even come close to — and for more years than their three presidencies combined.

But amidst the gilded pomp, lavishness and extravagance of the entire spectacle there was — in the end — the same end as everyone else; in this case, aptly symbolized by the plain wood coffin, a shepherd's staff, and the pages of an open New Testament fluttering in the wind. A man was buried in the earth, taking nothing with him; and in this case, leaving behind no worldly goods or treasures, but only his diaries and other writings, his good name and a legacy.

As for his legacy, both praise and respect, disdain and criticism have preceded him, and will most certainly follow. His arcane views of women and human sexuality that diminished some of God's children — balanced with his consistent, convicting affirmation of human life — were a delicate balancing act that was perhaps more political than theological. Still, many seemed mildly surprised by the countless number of folks who sought a common catharsis that surpassed the greatness of any one individual. There seemed almost a spiritual hunger and hankering to mourn his passing and seek to honor his presence among them by giving the body an extravagant send-off; as if holiness itself had taken leave of our lives.

I couldn't help think of all this in these days of the Church we call our joyful Eastertide. We are in the Eastertide of another man who lived and died, and was buried by his friends, who mourned his passing and had sought to honor his presence among them by coming to the tomb with oils and spices to anoint the body. And something very different happened. Someone had taken the body away, and they didn't know where to find him. Instead, he finds them! He finds two of them, for instance, walking on the road down from Jerusalem to a village called Emmaus.

There is always in these post-resurrection appearance stories a mixed-message, a dual reality, an emergence of an unearthly dimension breaking into this old familiar world. It is a new reality and presence of God that is unrecognizable; until we are met and encountered in our honest searching and wandering with the gift of recognition, illumination, insight and understanding of the larger presence and reality to which we have been raised.

The two disciples are shuffling along the road, their eyes downcast, feeling dejected and as empty inside as an empty tomb. For all the upheaval, grief and violence — and now confusing, puzzling news from women in their midst — they don't know what to think, what to believe, what to do. So they're just getting out of town. The village of Emmaus was as good as anyplace, and probably better than most.

It was known as a place of trauma, suffering and defeat, where the Roman army had burned it to the ground and crucified 2,000 insurrectionists in punishment for a Jewish revolt following the death of Herod in 4 BCE. Emmaus, and all it represented, would have been well-known to the hearers of this gospel story in Luke's early Christian community.

Wonderfully told, there is no recognition of the old Jesus on the part of the disciples, because resurrection is not about that. Words of scripture remain dashed hopes until the word is made present at common board with the breaking of bread. "Then their eyes were open, and he vanished."

In any other context such a tale might have seemed an astonishing magic trick. Not here. Instead the disciples turn to one another, for any astonishment was quickly superseded by a new understanding that illumined the old path. Even though it was the middle of the night, and danger would most likely pursue them, they rose immediately and returned to Jerusalem. They left a place of trauma and defeat, and returned to join the others whose hearts had already been set on fire.

To speak of the *physical* presence of the resurrected Lord is a tricky thing: it's a now-you-see-him, now-you-don't kind of proposition, *at best*. Better is the mysterious, dawning reality that we have been raised with him from all the death, defeat and heartache of this old mortal life to a new way of being in this world; as if one foot was already in the next. From heartache to heartburn.

All last week commentators kept referring to the famous corpse that lay for five days in public view as the man who once was, but is now more. If anything, the lingering holiness of the man should have conveyed the message with which he tried to faithfully live and die. It is the Easter message that burned in his heart: I am not here. I have joined with those who have gone before you, to meet the risen Lord of our life. Alleluia. Amen. *jb+*