

Homily: Third Sunday of Easter
Father Tom Ovalle, OMI
April 18, 2021

Scripture Readings: Acts 3: 13-15, 17-19; 1 John 2: 1-5a; Luke 24: 35-48

The late British Prime Minister Winston Churchill won the Nobel Prize for his six-volume history on, The Second World War. The final book or volume is titled Triumph and Tragedy. Now “triumph,” we can understand, the winning of the War, but why did Churchill include “tragedy”?

After D-Day, the Allies moved across Europe for the end was at hand. But President Roosevelt died shortly before the final victory against Germany, and this affected Churchill very much. Also, in July of 1945, the Labor Party won the general election and Churchill was out of office. While the end of the war was a triumph for the world, it didn’t happen without tragedy for Churchill.

As children, we learned that all of the most satisfying stories end with the words, “and they all lived happily ever after.” Some of us grew up believing that we would eventually arrive at that magnificent time ourselves. Even some of us, as adults, still believe in a “happily ever after” world. Many of us live in the expectation that our magical moment will occur somewhere and at some point down the road – when we get married, or when we get promoted, or when we retire. Sadly, but inevitably, we learn that the “happily ever after” world is only a fantasy.

Yes, everyone has moments of happiness, but happiness never comes to stay. Most of the time, we see the kind of happiness we want, but it is always in the hands of someone else, someone who may actually be less happy than we are. My brothers and sisters – happiness is an imaginary condition. The familiar line about the grass always being greener on the other side of the fence means that another person’s situation usually looks better than ours.

Many Americans think of happiness as a right – a right guaranteed by the Declaration of Independence. It reads the “inalienable rights” of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. But our forebearers may have been more realistic about happiness than we have given them credit for being! Happiness is no one’s right, nor is it guaranteed to anyone. “Happily ever after” can and does describe the bliss of heaven, but perfect happiness will not be found here on earth.

The post-resurrection appearances of Jesus raised questions about his resurrected body. In our Gospel reading today, the disciples to whom Jesus appeared on the road to Emmaus are reporting what had happened to the other disciples. Suddenly Jesus appears in their midst. They are “startled” and “frightened,” and they think they are seeing a ghost. This indicates that the resurrected Jesus was not simply a resuscitated corpse. For a physical body does not appear and disappear or pass through closed doors. On the other hand, Jesus is concerned to demonstrate to the disciples that he is not a ghost. He invites them to observe and touch his body, but this does not convince the disciples. Their doubts are only dispelled when Jesus eats a piece of broiled fish in their presence.

The body of the resurrected Christ was apparently a transformation of his physical body, so that it retained many of its characteristics but transcended its limitations. What matters is that the disciples experienced Jesus as a real and living person, the same Lord they had known and loved.

The resurrection of Jesus, extraordinarily wonderful as it was, had a downside for the disciples. The good news was that Jesus was alive. The bad news was that he would be leaving them to return to his Father. The triumph of Jesus' resurrection had a tragic element in it for the disciples. This is the nature of human life. Each day that we live is made up of both sunshine and shadows, good news and bad news. Triumph and Tragedy.

When Jesus called the twelve to follow him, he did not invite them to live "happily ever after." Following Jesus meant hardship and persecution for those first disciples. Following Jesus meant suffering as he suffered, and for some, dying as he died. They would be betrayed and forsaken by family members and friends. They would endure the loss of all things. Yet, they testified and witnessed again and again, like St. Paul, that nothing they lost mattered because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ. Forgetting what lay behind and straining toward what lay ahead, they pressed on toward the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. What many would consider tragic, they saw only as a triumphant way to live.

Does that kind of language have any meaning today in our kind of world? Does anyone suffer today for following Christ? Is there any significant cost in Christian discipleship today?

Our comfortable versions of faith do not change the call of Christ. Christ still calls us away from ourselves. He still invites us to the way of genuine self-discovery, the way of becoming who we really are. But it is always – the way of self-giving, suffering love. This is the only way we become who we really are. It means saying no as well as saying yes. We must say no to the pull of a dying world if we are to say yes to the kingdom of God. The triumphant way of Life is the way of love, which always involves suffering.

Yesterday, I went to a First Communion Mass and the priest spoke to the children about saints.

Saints are and can be described and defined in different ways. Yet, all would agree, however, that the true Saint follows the triumphant way of Christ.

The true saint is empty of self-concern and filled with God's love.

The true saint gives God's love to others – warning them, leading them, bringing them back to God's ways.

True saints become instruments of God. They have lost their own will in the will of God, not lost it --- but perhaps found it, for they have found freedom in submission to God.

True saints desire nothing for themselves, not even the glory of martyrdom.

May all of us strive to become true saints.... May we find true living in our death to self and find Triumph even in the midst of Tragedy. Amen.