

Surprised by Joy

Apparently the English poet William Wordsworth must have had a flash of remembrance – a recall of the presence of his young daughter Catherine so real that he stopped in his tracks and turned to see her - even though she had already died at the age of four. He writes of the incident in his famous poem: *Surprised by Joy*:

Surprised by joy – impatient as the Wind / I turned to share the transport - Oh! With whom / But thee, long buried in the silent Tomb, . . . / Have I been so beguiled as to be blind / To my most grievous loss! - That thought's return / Was the worst pang that sorrow ever bore, / . . .

In our Eastertide Gospel readings the disciples of Jesus were spared that experience. The joy they felt at the appearances of the really risen Jesus – near the empty tomb, beyond the locked doors of their refuge in that upper room, at the Inn along the road to Emmaus, by the Sea of Galilee - was not disappointed. He had really come back, was really there, ate from their table, let himself be touched – he was for real. And they remained surprised by this event for the rest of their lives – and glad.

But over the subsequent two thousand years how much of that surprise, that joy marks us current followers of Jesus? We do a lot of liturgical “celebrating” of his resurrection but it seems reactions of surprise and joy have worn off a bit. By way of so much time having passed it’s almost like the resurrection has become familiar enough to be taken for granted. Is anybody still surprised by the “fact?” Church art, like statues, colorful vestments, ornate church interiors try to sustain our sense of wonder – but Jesus has become so “theological” a figure, it’s hard to get emotional over an event so long ago when his humanity was still so touchable, when they could feel his breath as he breathed over them.

I have to confess that from childhood even into my adult life (say to the age of 30) after years of parochial elementary and high school and fifteen more years of seminary education – including a doctoral degree – I must not have been much more than a card-carrying follower of Christ, a bundle of reflexes rather than convictions. And not much joy; jocular, yes, but joyful?

Until my superiors sent me (God knows why!) to the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome to do some serious Scripture study. Even then, if in any way I took that assignment to be a serious one, it was more because I didn’t want to flunk out and embarrass myself. I felt no enthusiasm for higher studies. But there was no reason to worry about my becoming serious. In the first semester I was introduced by the Jesuits to an in depth study of the birth narrative of St. Luke and the whole account broke out into a *profoundly challenging theological drama* – to be handled with care lest it blow people’s minds.

And in the second semester a bouncy French Jesuit introduced us to St. Paul’s key *Letter to the Romans* – when the term “surprised by joy” *fit me for the first time* in my life and ever since; when, despite my being locked into my own upper room, into my “by the book” manner of religion, the risen Jesus came through my door – and, despite my regressions at times, I haven’t been the same since – an experience Vatican II tried to make universal, “catholic” again. And there is so much more to be said!