

**"The Empty Chair"**  
Homily of April 10, 2005  
by Father Brian Joyce

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It's really, really extraordinary. It's really extraordinary. The number one celebrity in the world this past week has been a religious figure, representing God and the gospel. It has really been an extraordinary week, extraordinary. John Paul II, superstar, larger than life, John Paul II in death commanded the attention of the press and media of the whole world and the presence of kings and queens and prime ministers and presidents. Extraordinary!

And then we get this very ordinary gospel. It's just about a couple of guys, going to a town called Emmaus that we really don't know anything about. We don't know their names, and they meet the Lord Jesus Christ. But it's so ordinary... There are not fireworks; there is no media attention; there are no headlines. It's just ordinary. It almost goes completely unnoticed. You all know the story about bumping into a stranger, about sitting down at a table sharing conversation and sharing a meal. Two down-in-the-mouth followers of Jesus, trudging along a dusty road and then getting into conversation. And the conversation is very familiar, like our conversation, every-day, ordinary conversation, this time filled with complaints (We know about that!) and filled with depression and despair. Life is a burden. Life doesn't turn out to live up to the promises that we expect and count on.

We recognize, before long, that it's not just two people traveling on the road to Emmaus, but they are traveling on the road of life, the same road we travel. And in the middle of that, they are asking, "Where the heck is God anyway?" And their conversation is every-day ordinary stuff, just like ours. They talk about their jobs. We talk about our job, about it's boring or frustrating or it's time to retire, or about being down-sized. We talk about our children. They're not going to Mass, or they're not married in the Church. We talk about our friends, many of them sick with cancer. We talk about the price of everything, especially the price of gasoline. We talk about the war in Iraq. Almost every one of us knows somebody who has a relative, a young brother or sister, a child who is serving there. And many of us know some who have been killed. And we talk about the Pope, who the next one's going to be. And we don't know. As a matter-of-fact, we cannot even pronounce the names of the candidates, let alone know who they are.

But now, these two, this couple walking along, begin to share their hopes, "We were hoping..... We were hoping for something better than this." And they share their hospitality. They say, "Stay with us. Come and break bread with us." And in sharing their hopes and sharing their hospitality they meet the Lord Jesus Christ, no technicolor. It's very ordinary, as ordinary and boring as Mass might be. But, without thunder and lightning, they meet the Lord Jesus Christ. It's so ordinary.

Let me tell you another story. It's a true story. It took place about twenty years ago. It's about a man, an old man, who was dying of cancer. His daughter knew there was a new priest who had just arrived in the parish and she called and asked the new priest to visit her father. When he was ushered into the room he saw a chair pulled up right against the bed, and he said to the old man, "Oh, I see you were expecting me." And the old man said, "I wasn't expecting anyone and I don't know who you are." So, the priest explained that he was the newly-arrived associate at the parish and he added, kind of embarrassed, "When I saw the chair pulled up against the bed, I thought you were expecting me." The old man said, "Oh, yeah. Yeah. The chair."

He said, "Father, will you shut the door." Then he said, "I want to tell you something I have never told anybody, not even my daughter.... I always have trouble with prayer. And I remember years ago going to the pastor and saying, 'Your homilies don't help me pray at all.' So, he gave me a book by some German, von Balthasar or something. It was a thick book about prayer. The first three pages had about twelve words I had to look up in the dictionary. So after one week, I gave it back to him. I said 'Thanks' but I felt like saying 'Thanks for nothing.'

I didn't pray at all for years, until this friend was talking to me about prayer and he said, 'You know, it's very easy, just talking to Jesus and listening to Jesus. It's really easy. All you have to do is sit down in a chair and get another empty chair and put it in front of you. And just remember and imagine the Lord Jesus is there. It's not spooky because Jesus said 'I'll be with you always.' And just spend some time and say what you are feeling. Listen for the Lord to speak.' " And, he said, "I've been doing that for years now. And, now that I am sick, I really love it. I might spend an hour or two every day, but, whatever you do, don't tell anybody and don't tell my daughter. I mean if she finds out I am talking to an empty chair she might put me into a funny farm."

The priest anointed him, prayed with him and two weeks later, heard from the daughter that he had died. He said to the daughter, "Did he die peacefully?" She said, "Oh, yes. I spent the morning with him. He was telling me corny jokes. I kissed him. I went to go shopping. When I got back, he had died. But it was the strangest thing. He had died leaning out of the bed with his head resting in that empty chair and a big smile on his face. Very strange."

We meet God in ordinary ways. And God is there for us, not with celebrities and deadlines. But God is there for us, sharing our conversation and hopes. And God is there for us, sharing our hospitality and our meals and in the breaking of the bread. And God is there for us, even praying with an empty chair. God is there for us. Very ordinary. Very ordinary. In fact, it's really, really extraordinary. Amen.