



# Witnesses of the Risen Lord

## Some Biblical Lessons and Examples for Catholic Educators

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Excerpts of his Keynote address to the CPCO Conference 2007

Your Excellency Bishop Wingle, Principals and leaders of Catholic education in the province of Ontario,

I would like to thank you for your invitation to address the annual conference of the Catholic Principals' Council of Ontario. To stand before 400 senior Catholic educators and administrators of this province is a privilege, and as a priest and educator myself, I realize how much our lives and ministries are intertwined. We need each other to give witness to our Catholic Christian faith and to shepherd and guide the educational communities and young people entrusted to us. The theme of your conference says so well, who we are, *Companions on the Journey* of education and faith.

We are still basking in the afterglow of the Resurrection and Easter. The Scriptural readings of this season are filled with powerful encounters and images of hope and new life. I wish to draw several examples of leadership and growth in faith and witness from the Resurrection Narratives of the New Testament. I will leave it up to each of you to make the necessary applications of these stories and lessons to your lives and professions.

This year in particular, our Lenten season got a “kick start” with the foolish news story of the discovery of Jesus’ tomb in Jerusalem. Hollywood teamed up with self-proclaimed archaeological gurus and neo-Gnostics to shock and awe believers and non-believers with a very old story. The media hype, though short lived, certainly put the theme of the Resurrection front and centre of our Lenten journey this year. Any way that you look at the Easter stories, they present us a mighty fragile beginning for a religion that has lasted over 2000 years. Yet that is where so many of us continue to focus our energy: on *that tomb*, on *that morning*, on what did or did not happen *there* and how to explain it to anyone who does not happen to believe it too. Resurrection does not square with anything else we know about physical human life on earth. No one has ever seen it happen, which is why it helps us to remember that no one saw it happen on Easter morning either.

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is the one and only event in Jesus’ life that was entirely between Him and God. There were no witnesses whatsoever. CNN, CBC, even Mother Angelica, and Salt and Light Catholic Television Network were not invited to cover the event! No one on earth can say what happened inside that tomb, because no one was there. They all arrived after the fact. Two of them saw clothes. One of them saw angels. Most of them

saw nothing at all because they were still in bed that morning, but as it turned out, that did not matter because the *empty tomb was not the point*. The living being that had once been inside of it was gone. What happened in the tomb was entirely between Jesus and God. For the rest of us, Easter began the moment the gardener said, “Mary!” and she knew who He was. That is where the miracle happened and goes on happening - not in the tomb but in the encounter with the living Lord. Every time he came to his friends, they became stronger, wiser, kinder, more bold and daring. Every time he came to them, they became more like him. Those appearances are what the Resurrection is all about and the experiences of those first Easter witnesses can teach us much about what it means to be a leader and a witness.

### Lessons on the Road: The Disciples of Emmaus



Let us consider the lessons learned from the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. This beloved Gospel story from St. Luke (24:13-35) is a very human story, full of pathos, stylized in pattern and

suggesting a Eucharistic celebration (vv.30-32). The disciples come with their questions and doubts (vv. 13-24); the Scriptures are recited (v.27); words of clarification and instruction are exchanged on the road (vv. 25-27); and finally, the moment of recognition comes in the context of a meal (v.31). The narrative concludes with the disciples’ return to the community in Jerusalem, only to find that the good news of the Resurrection has already been made known to those who patiently waited for Jesus in the Holy City.

Jesus approached the disciples in their blindness on the road and led them to sight. As soon as they recognize him after the bread is broken, he disappears from their midst. They are both able to look back over the past few hours and see how Jesus slowly brought them back to faith (v. 32) and helped them discover the meaning of the Messiah’s suffering, death and Resurrection.

Cleopas and his companion slowly journeyed through the darkness and desperation of faith. They had to discover anew God’s Word and God’s Envoy, the Risen Lord. Their initial sadness, non-understanding and disbelief are transformed into joy as they eagerly listened to the explanation of the Scriptures on

the road, and as their eyes were opened at table in Emmaus. The Good News descended from their head to their heart, and they experienced that strange and wonderful feeling of their hearts gradually being on fire. They found new meaning in the breaking open of the Scriptures and the sharing of bread. Such a discovery produces a desire in them to return to the assembled community in Jerusalem, and to share with those who waited there the good news of the Resurrection.

The journey motif of this passage is not only a matter of the distance between Jerusalem and Emmaus, but also of the painful and gradual journey of words that must descend from the head to the heart; of a coming to faith, of a return to a proper relationship with the stranger who is none other than Jesus the Lord. The evangelist Luke's picture of the dejected disciples can help us to recognize how difficult the struggle is for the world, and for each of us to yield to God's purposes. Jesus' disciples are unable to understand that he must suffer and this failure is connected with a series of other personal failings evidenced in the Scripture stories.

The Lord always listens to us and is always there. It is part of the Lords' pedagogy with regard to his disciples to always listen to them, especially when times are hard, when one has fallen, experiences doubt, disillusionment and frustration. His words make the hearts of the disciples "burn" and remove them from the darkness of sadness and desperation, provoking in them the desire to remain with him: "Stay with us, Lord."

#### **Lessons from the Resurrection Witnesses in the Fourth Gospel**

John's Resurrection story (Chapters 20-21) is a series of encounters between Jesus and his followers that reveal diverse faith reactions. Whether these encounters are with Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple, Mary Magdalene, the disciples or Thomas, the whole scenario reminds us that in the range of belief there are different degrees of readiness and different factors that cause people to come to faith and help them in turn to become witnesses and teachers.

#### **A Morning Race to the Tomb (John 20:3-5)**

Given John's penchant for symbolism, many people have tried to decipher the possible symbolic message encoded in the race of Peter and the Beloved Disciple to the tomb. Is it simply a question of the Beloved Disciple being younger and more agile than Peter? Or could it be that these two apostolic figures represent two currents within the early Church and perhaps a tension within the Johannine community; Peter representing the more staid, traditional, authority-minded model, and the Beloved Disciple representing the more charismatic, Spirit-filled, enthusiastic, less institutional model which may have predominated in John's community? Perhaps the arrival of the Beloved Disciple first signifies the emotional rush of those guided by their hearts and their personal experience of Jesus, but the fact that he waits outside and allows Peter to enter first suggests a certain deference for the Church's duly-appointed leadership?

#### **Mary Magdalene**

Dan Brown's *The DaVinci Code* resurrected an old debate about one of the most enigmatic figures in Christianity, Mary Magdalene. She has been hijacked over the past few years and her name and reputation have been distorted once again in Christian history. Today let us consider this outstanding woman disciple who was one of Jesus' closest friends.



Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany (sister of Martha and Lazarus) and the unnamed penitent woman who anointed Jesus' feet (Luke 7:36-48) are sometimes understood to be the same woman. From this, plus the statement that Jesus had cast seven demons out of Mary Magdalene (Luke 8:2), has raised the tradition that Mary Magdalene had been a prostitute before she met Jesus. In reality we know nothing about her sins or weaknesses. They could have been inexplicable physical disease, mental illness, or anything that prevented her from wholeness in mind and body. Mary Magdalene is mentioned in the Gospels as being among the women of Galilee who followed Jesus and His disciples, ministered to him, and who, according to each of the evangelists, was present at His crucifixion and burial, and went to the tomb on Easter Sunday to anoint His body.

In our Easter Sunday Gospels, we peered once again into the early morning scene of sadness as Mary Magdalene weeps uncontrollably at the grave of her friend, Jesus. We hear anew their conversation: "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" "Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to Him in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" (which means, Teacher). "Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, 'I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene came, announcing to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord," and that He had said these things to her. (John 20:15-18)

Hers was a seemingly short journey with earth-shattering ramifications. Because of her incredible message and mission, Mary Magdalene was fittingly called *Apostola Apostolorum* (Apostle to the Apostles) in the early Church because she was the first to see the Risen Lord, and to announce His Resurrection to the other apostles. For Jesus, women were equally as capable as men to penetrate the great religious truths, live them and announce them to others. There is nothing secret about this Gospel story. It is still astonishingly good news over 2000 years later.

#### **Thomas the Apostle**

John's story of Jesus and Thomas records the first post-resurrection appearance of Jesus and provides us with an archetypal experience of doubt, struggle and faith. Herein lies every Christian's experience: to believe without having seen. In this Gospel passage, we have a story within a story: the resolution of Thomas' doubts during Jesus' appearance to encourage the fearful disciples. Thomas only

believes when he hears the Lord's call to belief. Thomas is not the eternal skeptic, nor the bullish, stubborn personality that the Christian tradition has often painted. The Greek lexicon translates the word "skeptis" as "doubt, misgiving, hesitation and disbelief."



Let me be very concrete with Thomas' skepticism and relate it to our own. What do we do when something to which we have totally committed ourselves is destroyed before our very eyes? What do we do when powerful and faceless institutions suddenly crush someone to whom we have given total loyalty? What do we do when our immediate reaction in the actual moment of crisis is to run and hide, for fear of the madding crowds? Such were the questions of most of the people who had supported and followed Jesus of Nazareth for the better part of three years.

Both Jesus and Thomas were wounded - wounded by unbelief. Jesus died of the wounds inflicted by the unbelief of his disciples and of the people. Thomas was wounded by his inability to believe and out of this wound bled his deepest disappointment. But Thomas was healed by Christ's wounds. He saw, even felt, the deadly injuries; but the one who bore them was living. Through them, life was victorious in Thomas. Thomas had to feel his way guardedly to faith until he recognized the truth in his heart. This was the beginning of his Easter. He could believe again.

Centuries after Thomas, we remain forever grateful for the honesty and humanity of his struggle. The last word in the vocabulary of God is trust not betrayal, hope not despair, life not death. Though we know so little about Thomas, his family background and his destiny, we are given an important hint into his identity in the etymology of his name in Greek: Thomas (Didymous in Greek) means twin. Who was Thomas' other half, his twin? Maybe we can see his twin by looking into the mirror. Thomas' other half is anyone who has struggled with the pain of unbelief, doubt and despair, and has allowed the presence of the Risen Jesus to make a difference. When this happens, the ice of skepticism thaws. Thomas and his twins throughout the world risk everything in Jesus and for Jesus and become sources of blessing for others, in spite of their doubts and despair and because of their doubts and despair.

### Jesus and Peter



There is something very "fishy" about our Christian origins! The moving gospel story of Jesus and Peter is set against this incredibly beautiful backdrop of the sea. Chapter 21 is really an epilogue to the Fourth Gospel. This post-resurrection "breakfast symphony in two movements" has always been one of my favourite bible stories. The first movement (vv.1-14) describes the appearance of the Risen Jesus to his disciples by the Sea of Tiberias. It is concerned with fish and fishing. The second movement (vv.15-23) presents a poignant dialogue between Jesus

and Peter. It is concerned with sheep and shepherding. Peter certainly knew failure along the road of discipleship. The disciple who was called "rock" wept with regret in Luke 22:62 after denying his Lord. At the sea, he is given an opportunity to repent and recommit himself to Jesus.

The story begins calmly, even with a hint of bleakness. When Peter decides to go fishing, there is a certain feeling of resignation about it, alluding to the depression and discouragement he and the other disciples must have experienced after Jesus' death. Peter is simply taking up his old profession. The whole appearance of Jesus is shrouded in mystery, in the familiar atmosphere of "not knowing who he was" that we see so often from the gospel writers.

In the second movement, we have one of the most personal and moving commissioning stories in the Bible. "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these? Do you love me? Are you my friend?" (John 21:15). These thrice-repeated words of Jesus, preceded as they were by the repetition of the name, "Simon, son of John," form the pastoral mandate: "Feed my lambs. Feed my sheep." Peter's three-fold denial of Jesus during the trial and crucifixion is now cancelled out by the three-fold declaration of love. Yet the thought lingers in our minds, and certainly in Peter's. Why does Jesus ask Peter, on whom he is going to confer the pastoral office as chief shepherd, this question and not others? There are many other questions which we can imagine his having asked him concerning his suitability for ministry. For example:

*Simon, son of John, are you aware of the responsibilities that you are undertaking? Do you realize your weakness? Have you thought that it is difficult to bear others' burdens? Simon, son of John, do you understand? Are you aware of how many people about you are in need of help: the poor, the hungry, the sick, the needy, and the lonely? Where will you find bread enough to give them something to eat?*

Today we might translate those questions into the language of age and agility, good looks, academic qualifications, leadership experience, financial ability, success in public relations, proficiency, efficiency and eloquence. All these questions are very important. But Jesus sums them all up in a single, basic question, repeated with two different verbs in Greek to indicate the different nuances of love and friendship which are being referred to: "Simon, son of John, do you love me? Are you really my friend?" This question appears to be the central, indeed the only one, because it goes directly to a person's heart.

Each time Peter declares his love, it is followed by a command from the Lord to do what true love compels us to do, "Feed my sheep." Peter's distress is understandable. It is not easy to have one's declaration of love challenged. Every Christian knows that genuine love is put to the test over and over again. That love has developed, for Peter no longer boasts about his loyalty but rather allows the Risen Lord to look into his own heart: "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you" (John 21:17). Jesus not only forgave his sin but also conferred upon him ultimate responsibility for the flock. For Peter, insight into Jesus' true identity and his compassion brought new demands and responsibilities.

Some of us may think that our heroes are not supposed to fail. Peter teaches us how that type of hero is fantasy. We live in a real world where weakness and imperfection are the human condition. Peter is truly a model for us, as he must always remember his own failures as he undertakes leadership within the church. Rather than incapacitating him, his remembrance enables him to be a merciful and compassionate leader.

Peter learned his lesson well. He would imitate Jesus the rest of his life even to the point of giving that life as a martyr, dying upside down on a cross on the Vatican hill. Are we prepared to go to that extreme for our faith in Jesus?

### **Boldness and Solidarity Required for Leadership**

In the Acts of the Apostles Luke offers us a requirement for our work and our witness. We must pray for the gift of boldness. In Acts 4:31 we meet one of the first crises faced by the early Church and how the Spirit was present in the midst of it all. Peter and John were arrested, brought before the officials, interrogated, threatened and ordered to speak no longer in the name of Jesus the Lord.

Once released Peter and John returned to the community and it was at this point that the community utters a remarkable prayer. The occasion of the prayer is not a result of actual harm inflicted on the believers but rather the fact that the word of God was chained, impeded by force, threatened and suffocated. The community does not ask for protection. It does not ask that some cloud will come down and cover these terrible people or remove the wretched leaders. It does not ask that they be done away with quietly. It does not ask for an end to difficulties, nor does it ask for revenge. It asks for no power, strength or military might. It does not ask for wealth. It does not even ask for their conversion. Rather the community prays for guidance and simply wants to understand the events in the light of faith to discover the meaning of what has happened. Why are these things happening to us? Why is the word of God enchained? Why are these oppressors, who are our own people, forbidding us and threatening us not to speak in his name?

Prayer is the essential expression of the community, the main way of facing up to difficulties. When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered was shaken and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word with boldness. What do we mean by boldness? The word in the Scriptures in the New Testament is "parresia", not "parousia" which refers to the final coming of Christ. The parresia is the boldness that is the fruit of courage. There is nothing politically correct about preaching and living the Gospel. In fact the Gospel message is at times completely incorrect in the eyes and ways of the world and of our human structures and educational systems! The gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed with boldness and with courage. A boldness that does not overpower; that is not rude; that does not bully; that is never disrespectful; that never shows off or flaunts gifts that one has received. A boldness where the Spirit has been so lavishly poured out upon us as individuals and as a faith community, the church has an obligation to announce and to proclaim Jesus Christ boldly, unapologetically and unabashedly. Today let us beg the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with this boldness, so that we may proclaim the message of God

through our words, and even more, with our lives, especially in the Catholic schools across this entire province.

### **Conclusion: the Biblical Saga and Our Sagas**

I could have chosen many biblical stories that illustrate models and examples of leadership. I limited myself to these New Testament Resurrection witnesses of the two disillusioned disciples on the road to Emmaus, John the beloved disciple, impetuous Peter, the great lover Mary of Magdalene and Thomas the wounded truth teller. Why these and not others? I am convinced that each of us can identify with so many aspects of these folks who loved Jesus with all their hearts and minds and they remained so human in the process. They give us hope for ourselves.

The New Testament saga is about two friends of Jesus who gave up and tried to wander back into oblivion, only to meet the Good Shepherd in person who brought them back. It is about a woman, who stuck in her story and grief, did not recognize that her beloved was standing in front of her, not as gardener but as the Lord. It is an incredible story about Thomas, who far from being the chronic doubter, was really the lover who did not want to ever get burned so badly again. It is about Peter who, before he could be rock, had to be impetuous, denying, thick headed and foolish. It is about John who stayed close to the source, always believing the words of his friend. It is about a turbulent Paul, both lyrical in his theological vision and short tempered with those who disagreed.

God's embrace of a human church, of a community of fallible disciples or "learners" is a glory of the biblical heritage and one we need to remember now in our pastoral strategies. A generous portion of God's tolerance is something the contemporary church needs as together we seek the right way in a complex and diverse world.

Let me conclude with this prayer for each of you here today.

Crucified and Risen Lord,  
We are companions with you on the journey.  
We follow your footsteps through the desert to listen to the powerful Word of the God of Israel spoken in our own deserts.  
We follow you into Galilee, to understand and experience your ministry of presence and healing.  
We join the great crowd that came to meet you crying, "Hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord!"  
We walk with you on the road to Golgotha and share in your passion.  
In the suffering of our brothers and sisters, we recognize your own suffering and dying.  
We journey with you on the road to Emmaus and discover you in the breaking and sharing of the Word and the Bread.  
Show us the glory of your Resurrection.  
Open our eyes, our hearts, and our minds, so that we may always find you in the midst of your holy people, and among all those who thirst for you, wherever they may be.  
Write your Gospel upon our hearts.  
Send us forth carrying the Good News.  
Continue to lead and guide us on our pilgrimage to the heavenly Jerusalem. AMEN.