

Disbelieving for joy

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A straight-through reading of Acts of the Apostles is a curious experience. Have you read the part about the rioting silversmiths? Or the false news and rumors that plagued St. Paul on his travels? One might think that society has not improved during the past 2,000 years.

The term “astounded” appears repeatedly as the people of Acts hear the apostles or witness powerful works. It recurs in Luke 24:22. Later in the same chapter, in today’s Gospel reading for April 15, the Risen Lord drops by to visit disciples. During the moments that Jesus is conversing with them, even asking for food, we read that they were “incredulous for joy.” Some Bibles say “disbelieving,” which is altogether different from unbelieving. Today we might say that those people were too stunned to think, to put it all together. A brain freeze.

It makes sense that Pope Francis’ 2013 encyclical “Joy of the Gospel” would be his first major message. How odd that we would need a tutorial on joy. But we do. The word has been overused or diluted by commercial use. We need to reclaim its deeper sense that includes connections to God’s presence “deep down things,” as G.M. Hopkins wrote.

What use is there to all this? For many of us, myself included, the noise of news and events can muffle joy. If my day is to reflect my faith and priesthood, my prayer time will help me to locate that joy that leads to awe that opens into gratitude. In no way does this erase my disappointments or things I need to repent. But these latter things will not diminish if I have nothing with which to replace them.

Joy is a grace that happens when we are aware of goodness and beauties that we experience. This requires some work: We have to sift our experiences and be looking for the good and the beautiful. Too much of our public discourse concentrates on negatives without any glimmer of what to hope for. When that conversation is internalized, it anesthetizes joy.

As simple as it may be, we have to intend to find, see and want joy. This shapes our expectations when we visit a friend, share a meal or go to the movies. I suggest we should anticipate this when we go to church for Mass or drop by to pray or light a candle. You will find that you share something of the disciples’ astonishment upon meeting the Risen Lord. Because in that instant they knew that the Lord’s reality was changed, and they felt, deep down, that theirs had also.

Think about a person or event that awakens joy in you, and reflect on how the thought might give you an insight into the moments that astounded the disciples.