

Almost 21 years ago, I spent an afternoon as an illegal alien in Costa Rica. And I had one of the two or three most frightening experiences of my life. It was one of those moments of panic when you just feel like the rug has been completely pulled out from under you and that you're in free-fall.

Here's what happened.

In between my second and third years of seminary, I spent 6 weeks on a mission trip in Panama. I was assigned to help two priests in the province of Bocas del Toro, the rural northwestern region of Panama. For a few weeks I was in the eastern half of that province, helping out Fr. Julio (who now happens to be Bishop Julio). And for the next few weeks I was in the western half of that province, helping out Fr. Manning.

Fr. Manning's had several congregations he served. His territory butted right up against the border with Costa Rica. And on Wednesday afternoons he had a service in the small border town of Guabito. One Wednesday after the service he said, "Let's have dinner in Costa Rica." I reminded him that my passport was locked up in his filing cabinet over an hour's drive away. He said, "No problem."

Now I've crossed land borders before from the US into both Canada and Mexico, as well as between several countries in Europe. Those border crossings were modern, with 4 or 6 or 8 lane roads connecting the countries. That was not the case in Guabito. The border with Costa Rica was a small river. Over it was a one lane metal bridge surfaced with old wooden planks. And at either end was a small guard shack for the respective border guards. Fr. Manning saw me looking at the shacks and he said, "Don't worry, I'll take care of it." Fr. Manning spoke a few words to the Panamanian guard. We crossed the bridge. He spoke a few words to the Costa Rican guard. And with that, I was in Costa Rica. But I was there as an illegal alien with my passport left behind in another country.

We looked around a bit. Then we went to this little open air café for dinner. At one point I excused myself and went out back to the restroom. When I came back out front to the tables, to my horror, Fr. Manning was gone. I asked our waiter if he knew where my friend was. He said, "No se." 'I don't know.'

I'll tell you, a wave of total panic washed over me. What was I going to do? Here I was, an illegal alien in Costa Rica with no passport and very little money in my pocket. I was in a small border town with the nearest American embassy eighty miles away if I cut through the jungle, twice that distance if I took the roads. What was I going to do? There was no way I could get back over the bridge without Fr. Manning. I was up the creek without a paddle in sight.

+ + +

Our Gospel lesson this morning is the Easter account from St. Mark. Mark starts his 16th chapter with 5 words. These words seem incidental, but they cover a whole gamut of emotions. Five words:

"When the Sabbath was over..." Think about the full meaning of those words. "When the Sabbath was over..." Jesus was arrested Thursday night. His followers turned tail and fled. He was put on trial Friday morning, and by Friday night, less than 24 hours after his arrest, he was dead and buried. And then there was Saturday, the Sabbath. That was probably the longest Saturday any of Jesus' followers had ever experienced. Those first 24 hours from Thursday night to Friday night were probably a blur. Jesus was arrested and then executed quickly. But then there was Saturday. And those 36 hours from Friday night to Sunday morning must have moved at a snail's pace.

Jesus' followers had invested their lives in him. They had invested their hopes and their dreams in him. And now he was dead and buried.

Plus, they would have to deal with an enormous load of guilt. When Jesus really needed them, they were nowhere to be found. They ran away and abandoned him. And their leader, Peter, had even denied that he knew Jesus. They were hiding out in fear, wondering if they would be arrested and executed themselves. It must have been an awful Saturday for Jesus' followers. They had nothing to do but sit around and stew.

And yet, that's an part of the human condition. We all live with regrets of one sort or another. We've all turned our backs on God through our sin. We've all done things we're not proud of.

Is there anyone in this room that would like to volunteer to stand up here next to a large screen which was showing a video of all your past mistakes, sins, indiscretions, and bad behavior? Of course not.

There's a famous story about Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the author of the Sherlock Holmes stories. One day, as a practical joke, he sent an anonymous telegram to a number of his friends. The telegram read simply, "All is discovered. Flee at once." After that telegram went out, every one of those friends left London immediately. All of them had something in their lives that they didn't want discovered.

That's what Jesus' followers are struggling with. They had just exhibited their worst side. All of Jesus' disciples deserted him and fled. Peter denied that he even knew Jesus. I'm sure that they thought that those sins were unforgivable. So they sat there that Sabbath, and stewed and fretted.

+ + +

In Costa Rica, I sat there at that table at the café and fretted. What on earth was I going to do? How would I get back across the bridge? I couldn't cross that bridge by myself. But after a few minutes, Fr. Manning came walking up. It seemed like a few hours, but it was only a few minutes. He had seen a old friend walking by on the other side of the street and had chased him down half a block to say, "Hola." And I felt an incredible surge of joy and relief. Things were going to be fine. Fr. Manning could get me back across the bridge. I wasn't going to be stuck illegally in Costa Rica.

+ + +

Now, multiply my feelings exponentially. That's what Jesus' followers must have felt that first Easter.

When the Sabbath was over, the women go to the tomb. They find the stone has been rolled away. The tomb is empty, except for a young man inside dressed in white. And he has a message: "You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He has been raised."

And then the angel gives the women a message: "Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."

The women leave the tomb with a whole mix of emotions. Our translation says terror and amazement. But the Greek text literally reads "trembling and ecstasy." They're overcome with emotion at this point. Confusion, excitement, fear, and hope. But eventually we know that they do get back with the message, "Tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."

Galilee was their home. Jesus is promising to meet them back home. He will meet them where they are, not just physically, but emotionally and spiritually, too. And the message is earmarked for the disciples AND Peter. Peter denied Jesus. But Jesus doesn't deny Peter. The disciples ran away from Jesus. But Jesus doesn't run away from them. Instead, he promises to meet them where they are. He'll be there with forgiveness. He'll be there to offer all of them new life.

The Risen Jesus goes ahead of them to Galilee. But he has also gone ahead of them through the pains of death, and into the joy of new resurrected life.

The Resurrection changes his followers forever. Before the Resurrection, the disciples ran away in fear. After the Resurrection, they venture forth throughout the Roman empire, boldly proclaiming the Gospel. Before the Resurrection, Peter denied even knowing Jesus. After the Resurrection Peter not only claims Jesus, he is eventually nailed to cross of his own. Peter dies on another cross, because he will not deny Jesus again.

The Death and Resurrection of Jesus are life changing. The Death and Resurrection of Jesus are the heart and core of the Christian Gospel. There's nothing in all of scripture that's more important. There's nothing in your life that's more important.

Because we can't save ourselves. I can't give myself eternal life. I can't give myself forgiveness for my sins.

In Costa Rica, there was no way I could have gotten back over the bridge into Panama by myself without Fr. Manning. In life, there is no way any of us can reach heaven by ourselves. There's no bridge we can build. There's no ladder we can climb. We can't reach God on our own.

Fortunately for us, God extends his hand to us. God builds the bridge that we can't build. He builds that bridge with the wooden beams and the iron nails of the cross. His bridge is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And that bridge, the bridge of forgiveness, the bridge of eternal life, is there for us. We just have to believe and trust in the one who can get us across that bridge. We just have to put our faith in Jesus.

That was good news for Peter. Peter denied even knowing Jesus. But Jesus offers him forgiveness and relationship. "Tell Peter I am going ahead of him to Galilee. There he will see me."

And that is good news for us. Jesus knows the struggles and temptations of life. Jesus knows the pain of death. And Jesus knows the power of Resurrection. Jesus offers to meet you where you are. He offers you forgiveness and a relationship. And he offers you a share in his resurrected life.

Jesus died for the forgiveness of your sins. Jesus lives to bring you newness of life.

He changed Peter's life. He changed the disciples' lives. He can change your life, too.