

Sometimes in life when we go through trying times, much like the disciples who are on the road to Emmaus, it can be hard to see out of the abyss.

In 1998, a young woman named Peggy Molitor found herself in such a situation, in a harrowing situation at a state park, but also in a tough situation in life as she tried to find hope.

It was April 20th of that year that she says she experienced the kind of day that would shape her life forever. Because of a rather warm winter, there was no snow on the ground, and signs of spring were all around.

She and her friend Gretchen were at Banning State Park, which is just north of Hinckley. I love to go there too, especially in fall. Their hike began with a leisurely trek along winding trails of spring blossoms and animal wildlife and continued toward Hell's Gate, a rugged trail running parallel to the Kettle River. Hiking over rocks and tree roots, with Gretchen in the lead, she followed close behind admiring the sheer banks that dropped some thirty feet to the river below.

They continued their trek until they came to a clearing. Peggy guessed by Gretchen's abrupt halt that it was the spot overlooking Hell's Gate. The view was spectacular. The raging rapids beating against the rock ledges, silhouetted against the surrounding forest scene and streaming sunlight, made for a Kodak moment. It was breathtaking, but in a moment everything changed.

Approaching the spot where Gretchen had stopped, Peggy lost her footing. Falling, she reached for a branch extending from the cliff. It snapped. She fell straight down thirty feet to the bedrock below. Peggy did not remember hitting the ground, nor did she feel the impact when she landed. She has no recollection of how long it took her to process what had happened. She only remembered opening her eyes to find herself facedown in a puddle of water and hearing Gretchen yell her name.

Breathing was difficult and painful. She attempted to roll over on her back, but tremendous pain shot through her arms as she tried to pull them out from under her. She could not move her wrists. Using her legs and right shoulder, she rolled over on her back. Gretchen yelled down to her that she was going back to the park headquarters to get help. Hell's Gate was three miles from the park headquarters, so she knew it would be a long wait before help arrived. She was cold and shaking uncontrollably.

Thankfully a rescue team arrived within an hour. It was a heroic 90 minute effort to stabilize her and get her to the top of the cliff. They covered her with blankets, administered oxygen, put her head in a C-collar, splintered her left wrist and strapped her to a backboard. She had fallen in one of the most remote and inaccessible areas of the park, so getting her out and to a hospital was extremely difficult. They debated how to get her out of the area. There was no place for a helicopter to land, and a boat couldn't navigate the rapids below where she laid. Lifting her up using ropes wasn't an option, so they finally decided to carry her up the cliff. In a complex effort that took a

great deal of teamwork and physical strength and communication, a group of 10 rescuers carried her up the rocky bank. It was a hand-over-hand job of lifting and passing her up a series of rock ledges to get her to the top. Rescuers had to find good footing and handholds while lifting and passing her to fellow workers. Anyone could have slipped and fallen.

After reaching the top, she was carried three-fourths of a mile to the campground where a four-wheel-drive truck was waiting. It took her to a picnic area where an ambulance was waiting. She was taken to a nearby hospital and then airlifted to Minneapolis. X-rays showed both wrists were broken. A CAT scan revealed bruised ribs, but no internal bleeding or injuries. She had a deep cut on her right forearm and several bumps, bruises and scratches. She spent three days in the hospital and returned a week later for surgery on her left wrist. Six weeks after the accident, her right cast was removed. Two weeks later, the cast on her left arm was removed, and she began an 8-month program of physical therapy.

After her hospital stay and surgery, she spent six weeks living with a friend. With both arms in casts, she was unable to care for herself. Having her independence stripped from her was extremely difficult, but through it she learned to do what she was never good at: asking for help. She said she has an independent spirit by nature, and always found it easier to help others than to let others care for her.

Before her accident, she had also fallen in another way - into depression. There were nights when she would cry herself to sleep, praying to God and pleading with Him, "God, please take me home! I don't want to deal with life anymore. I don't care how you do it - disease, car accident, anything - just take me home." But ironically when she was falling over the cliff and believed she was going to die, she cried out "Jesus, save me!" Overwhelmed with life, she had begged God to take her life away. But when confronted with the reality of death, she had asked her life be spared. She says God heard both pleas, and in His sovereign will and purpose for her, He spared her life.

In the months following her accident, when she struggled to make sense of why it happened, she came to realize that in her finite human understanding, she can never understand the ways of God. His ways are beyond human comprehension, yet His love and concern for humanity are realized even in the midst of tragedy. Stripped of her pride and independence, she was forced to rely on the love of God and others. And she found her faith strengthened and renewed. Even now, years later, her physical scars, which are a daily reminder of a horrifying day and the frailty of life, serve the greater purpose of reminding her that life is never without hope.

Since that April day in 1998, Peggy says she has encountered further suffering and tests of her faith. But because her faith rests in God, who deeply loves her and cares about her, she says she knows for certain that nothing this life brings - disease, pain, hardship, or even death, can separate her from the love of God.

And that is because God is always with us, journeying with us each and every step of the way.

Sometimes like Peggy, we can get lost in life. Think of for instance two other people in the Bible, Adam and Eve, symbolizing all of humanity, who lose their way by falling into sin, choosing to disobey God. They run from God to hide when He comes into the garden. And yet while there is a consequence for their actions, God does not give up. And this is where Jesus enters the picture. Like them, the two disciples, Cleopas and another one unnamed, perhaps his wife, are walking away in a sense from God. In their case, where Jesus was killed and raised is in Jerusalem, and they are walking away from the city. Adam and Eve were in the darkness of sin; Cleopas and the other disciple, like Peggy, were in the darkness of sadness and grief, not seeing any hope in their lives. But what happens is Jesus walks with them. And He listens to their story. And what we find is that like many people, they know the data of the faith if you will, who Jesus was, what happened to Him, but they haven't really come to know Him at a deeper level. However when Jesus explains things to them, and they have this conversation, we hear their hearts are burning. And in the breaking of the bread, a holy meal, their eyes are opened.

It's a beautiful story of how Jesus journeys with us, and also of the reality that while life is hard, there is hope. But it doesn't mean that like Peggy, and like the disciples, we aren't without doubts at times. On our part, like Peggy, we have to let the love of Jesus dispel those doubts and the darkness of our lives, and let Him set things right in our lives and then set about going in the right direction of life.

With respect to the doubts, as we heard last week with Thomas, they are a part of faith. But when we accept Jesus, we also have to, like the disciples, be changed by Him. Despite the doubts we have at times, Christ is also saying to us "Why are you troubled? Peace be with you" and "be not afraid – you believe in God, believe also in me." Doubt is often something I grapple with too. God at times has seemed very mysterious and distant; maybe you are experiencing this now as you again, aren't here tonight at Mass and dealing with the challenges of this virus we all are going through. I remember once driving home from an anointing, I anointed a young woman losing her battle to cancer. She was about 20 years of age, and the best hope of treatment was that she would be able to make it to June to see her sister graduate. But yet she still had faith, which is why I was invited into her home with her family. On the way back to the parish, it would have been helpful for me had God taken the form of George Burns and explained things to me about why there were such horrible things as cancer, and why this was happening to her. But were that to have happened, were Christ to have come down from the tree of life, would there be any need for faith? I cannot understand why there are things such as viruses, why there are things such as cancer, and sometimes I pray the prayer of father of the sick child from Mark 9:24: "Lord, I do believe, help my unbelief." God at times can feel distant, but God is there. As I said on Easter Sunday, the Cross and the empty tomb are God's definitive statement that you and I are somebody, and that we truly matter. Life on earth can be joyful, but also frightening and empty. How nice it might be to force God to take whatever shape we prefer, but that's

not how things work, nor how things should work. Doubts are truly part of the faith life, and while at times God may seem distant, the challenge for you and me is to be OK with the times that He is close and the times that He seems far away but just to remember that no matter what, He is with us at our side to help us on the road of life, just as He was with Peggy to help her find peace and with those disciples.

And this is why we must remember, like Peggy finally came to realize, that God will feed us. We have nothing to fear with God. Whether it is our sins, our our pains, or our anxieties or whatever it may be, remember when we look to Jesus, we are given His love, the gift of His Body given up for us. Nothing can separate us from God's love, as Peggy said at the end of the story. But we can't just know the data of the faith like how to say prayers, how to go to Mass, etc. The catechism is wonderful, but we all need to really know Jesus too. In these trying times when we maybe have a little more time than we are accustomed to, you might consider forming some new prayer habits, or just finding time for silence and meditation or different ways of encountering God. Talk to Him, and come to know Him.

But what does that love do? It opens our eyes. The disciples now go back to Jerusalem. They are on the right road. Peggy in her near-death experience and recovery came to see God's love in her life. And though it did not get rid of more challenges down the road, she came to see what accepting God's love entailed. So hopefully for us too, as we think about how much God loves us, we can think about how can that love change us to travel the road of life better. Maybe it's learning to trust God more and let go of anxieties rather than ruminating. Or for others it may be a sin of habit and learning how to gradually reduce it's presence in our lives. So what in your life is keeping you in the dark right now? Open your eyes to the love of God. And let that love change you, and help you take the steps needed to get on the right track.

As Peggy learned too, we have to trust others. In life, we can all fall in a ravine. In her case, it was a team of people who pulled her out, and it was her friend who helped her find health again. Sometimes we have to ask for help. But it's important to remember God gives us people who are His face and voice to us to help us on that journey. Family, friends, counselors, teachers, all kinds of people who meet us on the road when we are struggling. At times though it can be hard to admit we can't go it alone due to pride or denial. But all of us need help - so we need the courage to reach out to others and admit it.

Lastly, we have our eyes opened too to how we can help others. We see Jesus in one another and respond in kind. Here at Saint Joseph's, this would have been volunteer appreciation weekend. We would have had a blessing and refreshments after Mass tonight. While we can't do that tonight, we can still have a blessing which I'll do at the end of Mass. But people help one another come closer to Jesus in so many ways at Saint Joe's. Literally you are watching this because of a team of volunteers making this production possible. But there are also the catechists, the ushers, the lectors and Eucharistic Ministers, the funeral lunch crew, the Samaritan Ministers, those who are in RCIA, RCIC, the money counters and so many others who help out in so many ways

but all do the same thing: through their volunteering, they help people on their faith journey. All of us can take a page from these great people and remember we can do what Dorothy Day said once: "Everything a baptized person does every day should be directly and indirectly related to the corporal and spiritual acts of mercy." We see much of that in the kind things people are doing for others in these challenging times, but as life goes on we must remember that from listening to a friend, to volunteering, or showing patience and kindness with others, each of us has power to help others on the road to God's Kingdom.

In life, there is much that comes at us to try to separate us from the love of God. For while life has many blessings, it has many pains too. And from our own sins, to the challenges life brings, sometimes the face of God can be hard to recognize. But just as I have pain too because I can't see you tonight who are watching and look out at the pews and celebrate Mass with you physically here, I know you are here with me, around this altar, and you are praying for me as I pray for you as together, we help one another to become saints, because together we are loved by the God who is love. A God we might not always be able to see, but a God who is with us to put us on the right road, to give us His mercy, His love. So in our lives, when the pain, the doubts, the sin can turn the skies dark and we can lose our way, may our eyes be opened to see Jesus who is with us always, to move us from sin to grace, to give us His love, and to ultimately lead us home. So open your eyes to the risen Christ, your friend but also your redeemer, and never forget He is with you every single step of the way.