

Life as we all know can be extremely challenging, for despite the high moments, there are also moments of pain, and in those moments, in particular when the pain drags on, and a string of bad days turn into weeks or months, we can wonder OK, what is the plan here, and where am I going. Life at times feels like a war, and to quote William Tecumseh Sherman “war is hell.”

But our lives here are not meant to just be running out the lock, or looking for diversions. Life has so much joy; there is beauty in the world, and also in people. And God seeing this potential and beauty is at the heart of the Easter Season; a story of life over death, a story we also participate in when we choose to be a people of hope. The problem can be like the disciples in the Gospel, who like the apostles last week were a bit downcast, we just need a reminder of how God is with us helping to spur us on to heaven, but that when we walk with Him as they did to Emmaus, we are meant to run and tell others about our faith by being a people of hope. Doing so isn't easy, but it can do so many incredible things.

Recently in the news, Irene Gut Obdyke has been featured, a Polish hero of World War II who entered eternal life in May of 2003. A movie has been

released (I haven't seen it yet) called Irena's Vow, that tells of her story of what she did for 12 people during the horrors of the Second World War II.

For Irene Gut Opdyke, that observation of war being hell held quite true. During World War II, she endured sexual assault, multiple arrests, and brutal interrogations from both Nazi Germany and the USSR.

Despite all that trauma, however, Opdyke found the courage to save 12 Jews from the Nazis by hiding them where the Germans least suspected it — in a German major's own villa.

As she later told her daughter, Jeannie, "When stuff like that happens, you don't have time to think through what you are going to do. You've got to react."

In 1939, Opdyke joined the Polish Army with other nurses from her school. "It seemed unreal to me, as though I were only acting a part in a play," she later wrote in her memoir, *In My Hands*.

Irene made up her mind to help Jewish Holocaust victims after witnessing a Nazi soldier kill a Jewish infant. This would be the point where, in the film just released about her life “Irena’s Vow,” she made the vow to help other Jewish people in any way she could.

That reality soon turned into a nightmare when she was captured by Russian soldiers who had invaded Poland. Opdyke was beaten, raped, and sent to work at a Soviet hospital. She remained there until a prisoner exchange allowed her to return to Poland.

Back in her Nazi-occupied home country, Irene began working in a munitions factory that supplied weapons to the German front. After fainting due to the fumes one day, she was allowed to move to the kitchens, where she served meals to German soldiers.

While running an errand for work one day, Opdyke witnessed an SS soldier violently throw a Jewish infant to the ground. At that moment, she decided she would help the Jewish people if the opportunity ever arose — and soon enough, it did.

Irene was soon transferred to the town of Tarnopol, where she continued serving meals to German officers. There, she became friends with 12 Jews who worked in the laundry room washing the soldiers' clothes.

Opdyke started to overhear the officers talk about wiping out nearby Jewish ghettos. She warned her friends in the laundry room, who spread the news to their friends and relatives, allowing countless people to escape before their homes were destroyed.

She also began smuggling food into Jewish neighborhoods. As she wrote: "I knew it was a drop in the ocean, but I could not do nothing."

However, as the Nazis began to ramp up their "Final Solution," Irene started taking bolder action, as well. In 1943, she helped six Jews escape into a nearby forest by utilizing a pass from the German major she worked for, Eduard Rügemer, and hid them in a wagon until they reached safety.

Later that year, Opdyke overheard plans for Tarnopol to finally become "Judenfrei" — free of Jews. She said: "I knew this meant my friends in the

laundry room would be killed..I didn't know what to do." But the Holy Spirit helped her figure that out.

In a stroke of luck and at just the right time, Major Rügemer asked Opdyke if she would start working as the housekeeper in his villa. She eagerly accepted — and decided she would bring her Jewish friends from the laundry room with her.

When Major Rügemer invited Opdyke to live with him as his housekeeper, she later recalled, "I knew then that could be the place I would hide the Jews." She sneaked her friends into Rügemer's home, hiding them in both the cellar and the attic so the major wouldn't discover them.

To make matters more desperate, one of the Jewish couples hiding in the home discovered they were expecting a baby. They told Opdyke they would give the child up to avoid detection; they even asked her to help with an abortion, but but she told them not to fret. "We'll see — you'll be free," she told them.

Unfortunately, Opdyke's heroic act wouldn't remain a secret for long.

After hiding her friends successfully for nearly nine months, Opdyke forgot to lock a door one day, and Major Rügemer discovered the Jewish refugees in his home. “I trusted you. How could you do this behind my back, in my own house?” he screamed. Opdyke begged him not to tell anyone, and he agreed — on the condition that she become his mistress. “I won’t tell you it was easy,” Irene Gut Opdyke later said. “But I knew there were 12 lives depending on me.”

Soon after the discovery of the Jewish fugitives, Soviet forces began advancing toward Tarnopol. The Nazis were losing the war, and German forces started retreating. Opdyke and all 12 of her Jewish friends were able to flee into a nearby forest — and the pregnant Jewish couple welcomed a healthy baby.

“On May 4, 1944, a little boy was born in freedom!” Opdyke fondly remembered. “That was my payment for whatever hell I went through.”

Irene had saved more than just 12 lives with her heroism.

She immigrated to the United States in 1949, where she learned just how much of an impact she'd truly had on the Holocaust victims she helped.

One day, a man she didn't recognize came up to her in New York and said, "Irene, you don't remember me, but you brought me shoes in the forest."

Opdyke married a man named William Opdyke and raised a daughter, living a quiet life for many years. Then, in 1974, she heard a Holocaust denier speak and became enraged.

She later stated, "I think another Holocaust could happen if we don't mingle together to try to understand one another and not be ignorant," Opdyke said. "It's my duty to tell the truth about what I saw."

So she began to travel across the country, telling her story. "She became a moral compass to tens of thousands of children," Rabbi Haim Asa said upon her death in 2003, as reported by the Los Angeles Times.

Even though Irene died almost 20 years ago, her story lives on. Her daughter Jeannie Smith maintains a website in her memory and continues to speak about her mother's heroism.

As Smith said when her mother died, “Her biggest fear was that people wouldn’t understand what she was saying. But she was amazing... and her story always got through.”

On June 9, 1995, a special ceremony of Catholic and Jewish leaders was held at Shir Ha-Ma’alot synagogue in Irvine, California. Pope John Paul II had bestowed a papal blessing from Rome on 77-year-old Irene for her heroic actions as a 19-year-old in Poland to save Jews who would otherwise have died in the Holocaust. The recognition of the Church came 13 years after Irena had been recognized by Yad Vashem in Israel as a “Righteous Among the Nations.”

Her motivation for all of this, said her daughter, was her faith; as she put it, her mom grew up with a faith-based household and a very strong personal faith in God himself, and honestly believed that if he opened a door for her, he would see it through... so she literally placed her life herself her actions in God’s hands and trusted him for the outcome.” God has opened the door to us for heaven - and He will see us through, something we are called to do, and something that’s at the heart of our Gospel this week.



In our Gospel for this week, the disciples, Luke writes, “told their story.” The story is about what had just happened on the road to Emmaus and about how, at the breaking of bread, they finally recognized that their new companion was Jesus, their Lord. There’s an excitement about them as they’ve experienced the risen Christ, and they want to share this excitement with others. They are witnesses to the faith.

But as we read the whole story, this excitement isn’t always apparent. Remember last week when we met the apostles in the upper room locked up out of fear. These disciples are also very dejected too; they don’t see Jesus in their midst at first. That failure to see is a common theme in the post-resurrection stories; Jesus appears different, perhaps as He appeared in His transfigured state in the transfiguration story. But then as He journeyed with them onto Emmaus, and their hearts burn more and more with understanding, they see Him finally when He breaks bread with them, and now our story today focuses on these two running forward to Jerusalem to share their hope with others.

There’s two key takeaways from this Gospel.

The first, is that while all of us would probably like to touch the hands and side at times, as I reflected on last week, that isn't an option for us - but these stories of our Lord remind us of how He is journeying with us to a final destination, and this should give us hope too. He again says "Peace be with you," and then appears to them sharing a meal, with their minds being opened. Life as we all know is hard; like Irene facing so much suffering, she had to keep enduring it - but rather than give up, she moved forward in trust, and lived out her vocation. When we look to our God, we get a lot of insight into what awaits us, and again it goes back to that word "peace." The whole story of our Lord is one of God's wanting us to have peace; of darkness to light, God not wanting to abandon the world but show us how much we are loved. God does allow evil, such as Good Friday, the Holocaust, for we are given free will. But God enters into this with us; and He will lead us home. Hopefully this guides us - for then as is the case today, there are people who believed that when we die that was it; to dust you return; others felt at best you went to some shadowy place that wasn't all that much to look forward to; and still others like some of the Greeks and Romans thought you escaped the body. Rather, what happens when we die is we do meet God. And we will be told that same thing these disciples

are told: peace. We will be judged, but this should not fill us with terror; rather it should fill us with a desire to become better as we continue that journey, and if some things we cling to still need to be let go of, Jesus will do just that as He does in this story. He will help us to open our minds and hearts fully so we can love fully, for He is the God of love. We can take comfort in that what awaits us is truly what eye has not seen, ear has not heard.

But secondly, the question then becomes how do we become a people of hope? Again, note the last words of the Gospel: "You are witnesses of these things." Irene was a witness. A witness share the faith with others. Irene knew she could not end the horrors around her, but she could make a difference. She knew God could do great things through her, and her faith never wavered. She radiated hope. So how do we do this in our lives? Through the love we show our families; through the meals we prepare and the conversation we have around the dinner table like the disciples have with Jesus in the Gospel; through the sacrifices we make for others; through inviting people to Mass and sharing our faith with them; through being inspired to speak up as Irene did to the Holocaust Denier when people attack the faith, or are misguided on faith and morals. The Holy

Spirit is hopefully an animating force in our lives. As one preacher, Fr. Samuel Burke, an English Dominican priest asks, this Easter did we choose the bunny over the cross and miss an opportunity or even shirk the responsibility to witness to Christ's Resurrection? We do that through knowing the story; through learning our faith and sharing it. We do it through looking at ourselves and our ongoing battle with sins and addressing them, trying to overcome them. And we do it of course through a million simple actions towards others done with great love over the course of a lifetime.

Indeed, hope is such a powerful thing, and when Christ changes us, as it did the disciples after breaking bread at Emmaus, as it did Irene, we can transform the world, helping people to break free from apathy, of shame, or of thinking there's no signs of God in this world when life gets them down, of despair. God believes in us, which is why He sent the Son and the Holy Spirit has been sent to empower us. So, like Irene, may we tell his story, and tell his story in our story - and in so doing remind people of the power of hope by helping them to see it in their lives, and travel the road of their lives that leads to what eye has not seen, ear has not heard. That is Christian hope, and that is what is at the heart of our Easter Celebration.