

First Impressions EASTER VIGIL (A)

Gn 1: 1-22; Gn 22: 1-18; Ex 14: 15–15:1; Is 54: 5-14; Is 55:1-11;
Bar 3: 9-15; Ez 36: 16-17a,18-28; Rom 6: 3-11; Matthew 28: 1-10

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

When you are reading a gospel passage can you tell which evangelist wrote it? No peeking at the top of the page! Today's resurrection account is a dead give-away (no pun intended!). It is from Matthew. Each of the gospels gives a different version of the Resurrection. After all, they were written decades after the event. Instead of blending them into one coherent story and eliminating the inconsistencies, the church has chosen to let each gospel writer tell the story in his own way and for his own purposes. There is wisdom in that decision, for in the diversity we gain deeper insights into the Resurrection and its implications for our faith.

The gospels were spoken before they were written. Our earliest Christian ancestors told them in their gatherings and proclaimed them to non-believers, inviting them to faith. Doctrines of faith----that Christ was the Word-made-flesh; that he died for us; was raised from the dead and appeared to his disciples, etc.—needed to be fleshed out. And so they were, in the gospels, as each evangelist tailored the story to respond to the communities for whom they were writing. The evangelists certainly knew their hearers and how to put words and images to the Good News for them.

Rather than preach on the Resurrection in general, as if it were a theme for reflection, I would pay close attention to how Matthew tells the story. That's where the message for our lives lies. Which takes us to today's resurrection account from Matthew. Mark was probably the first gospel written and Matthew relies on him. But whereas Mark doesn't describe Jesus' appearance to the disciples, Matthew does.

It is, "After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning." The event happens on an ordinary day in the week when people are finished with the sabbath and have returned to their daily work and routines—mostly struggling at very hard work to feed and support their families. Don't expect resurrection appearances just on high holy days, in dedicated places and under certain, ideal conditions. Look for the Risen One where "the rubber hits the road," in daily life, while doing ordinary chores. If the Risen Christ isn't with us where we work out our Christian lives, he

is still in the grave with the stone still sealing the entrance and the guards keeping close watch.

Who are at the tomb? “Mary Magdalene and the other Mary” went there, Matthew tells us, as “the first day of the week was dawning,”----he is signaling that something very new is coming to light. The women return to mourn the dead the way we revisit the past and the dead places in our lives. There were also guards at the tomb. This gospel reflects the conflicts between the early Christians and the synagogue leaders. Since Jesus had predicted his resurrection, just prior to today’s passage we read that the chief priests and Pharisees went to Pilate and requested a guard be placed at his tomb to prevent his body being taken and his disciples spreading word that, “He has risen from the dead” (27:62-66).

At the appearance of the angel, “The guards were shaken with fear of him and became like dead men.” God’s power is greater than any human attempt to quell the Good News. The dead one is risen from the dead and the guards, who were alive, become like the dead. A great reversal is taking place. The presence of the guards is also symbolic of the opposition Christians will meet later as they begin to preach the Resurrection to the world. The guards and the stone are supposed to make sure nothing new can happen—at any of our tombs. Take heart, Matthew tells us, because God’s power can roll away the stone and raise us from defeat and death to new life. God has the true power and the worldly powers are “shaken with fear...and become like the dead.”

There is little subtlety or ambiguity in Matthew’s account: the earthquake is like a kettle drum announcing the event; the angel, who descends, is like lightning; his clothes are white like snow; the stone is removed; the guards are shaken and Jesus himself makes an appearance with the command to go tell the news to his followers. Matthew seems to want to leave little doubt about what has happened: Jesus Christ is risen from the dead.

Where can Jesus be found? The angel tells the women that they must go tell Jesus’ disciples that he is raised from the dead, “and is going before you to Galilee; there you will find him.” Then the women meet Jesus and he also instructs them, “Do not be afraid. Go tell my brothers [and sisters] to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.” Why Galilee? Jesus came from Galilee and Matthew is reinforcing the link between the earthly Jesus and the risen Christ. The risen One is no illusion or phantasm, he is the very one they followed in Galilee. That is also the place where

Jesus began his ministry; where he preached, healed and gathered his first followers. Remember that after Jesus' arrest the servant girls identify Peter as being with "Jesus the Galilean," and recognize Peter as someone who was with the "Nazarene." When he denies it a bystander says, "You are one of them for sure! Why your accent gives you away" (26:69-75). Jesus and his followers are linked to Galilee, his ministry started there and the disciples will go back there to continue what he did and called them to do. They will start in Galilee and go out to proclaim the risen Christ and his gospel to the whole world.

Galilee was also a place of great mixes; where Jews had mixed with and lived along side Gentiles. Great trade routes passed through Galilee and so the people there had exposure to many religions and cultures. The Jews from Galilee were considered less "pure" than those who were in Jerusalem--- the location of the Temple, the center for worship and "true religion." Jesus is still reaching out to outsiders and telling his disciples to do the same, to preach to anyone who will listen to his message, regardless how worthy the religious elite consider them. How many times have we discovered an eagerness to respond to God among contemporary "Galileans" in our midst? As with Jesus, so with us: the very ones rejected by the sophisticated and pious world, the ones on the "highways and byways," are the very first to embrace the good news about Christ.

Both the angel and Christ tell the women not to be afraid. Of what? Does it take more courage to believe in a Risen Savior than in an admired, but dead religious teacher? Easter can just be a cute feast, with its bunnies, chocolate rabbits, colored hard boiled eggs and sentimental cards. But Matthew is showing us an earthquake, a dazzling presence straight from heaven to roll back the tomb's stone, overcome guards and then, the presence of the risen Christ himself.

We can celebrate Easter with a parade of new clothes or we can receive courage from the first instruction we hear, "Do not be afraid." What does it mean in our lives that everything has changed for us?...That we don't have to surrender to the seeming-greater forces that want to overpower us; that we don't need to be influenced by political and military solutions that keep us in sealed tombs; that religion doesn't have to be ritualistic and legalistic; that even shattered lives can be raised to new life? In other words, what does it mean not to be afraid and to believe that "the first day of the week" is also dawning for us as it was for the women and Jesus' disciples sent to Jerusalem? God had done it again: reached out to where death had the upper hand and brought forth life. Go tell that in your own Galilee.

When we speak and act on the Good News, people will say to us what they said to Peter in the courtyard that dark and dreadful night when it looked like his world had collapsed, "You too were with Jesus the Galilean.... You are one of them for sure! Your accent gives you away."

A POEM-----BLACK SWALLOWTAIL

The caterpillar,
 interesting but not exactly lovely,
humped along among the parsley leaves
 eating, always eating. Then
one night it was gone and in its place
 a small green confinement hung by two silk threads
on a parsley stem. I think it took nothing with it
 except faith, and patience. And then one morning

it expressed itself into the most beautiful being.

—Mary Oliver, "RED BIRD," (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008) page 40.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

THE TRIDUUM BOOK, by the editors of "Modern Liturgy." (San Jose, CA: Resource Publications, Inc. 1997), page 89. ISBN 0-89390-394-9.

This practical resource is an updating of the previous, THE HOLY WEEK BOOK. It includes commentaries on the lectionary readings, prayers and suggestions for celebrating these holy days in parish settings based on the symbols and rituals. There are also essays pertaining to the three days taken from Modern Liturgy magazine.

QUOTABLE

An American monk wrote... "The fast itself is prayer. It is continuous, unceasing prayer.... Even if my other prayers are somehow reduced, my fast is praying always. It rises up to God like incense that never stops burning. Fasting as a prayer form expresses the weakness of [humans] and the power of God. Fasting is an embodiment of the truth that we depend, we need, we are weak...."

Fasting is silent prayer: prayer that goes on day and night during the fast: prayer of

deep communion with Christ; acceptance of the vulnerability of Jesus of Nazareth and of his body; deep communion with the humiliations of so many human beings: youths, senior citizens, physically or mentally handicapped, sick people, dying people, and all those whose weakness and powerlessness come from the harshness of their own brothers and sisters; campesinos, untouchables from so many countries, refugees, women, poor, downtrodden, oppressed, prisoners, who might never taste anew the freedom and the company of their loved ones.

---Alain Richard, OFM. "Fasting as Prayer," in THE TRIDUUM BOOK, page 89. JUSTICE NOTES

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CORRECTION

[Deacon Paul Rooney, of Omaha, wrote about last week's "Justice Notes" which said, "the bishops refer to the death penalty as **"intrinsic evil."** He asked about the source and so Anne and Bill Werdel responded. Thanks to Paul, Anne and Bill.]

Dear Father Jude,

Thank you for bringing this to our attention. Your reader is indeed correct. The US Bishops did not describe the death penalty as an "intrinsic evil," but opposed capital punishment in these words: **"Our nation's continued reliance on the death penalty cannot be justified."** #69, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship, USCCB, November 14, 2007*. The Bishops give abortion and racism as examples of intrinsic evils, but not capital punishment. *ibid.*, #34.

Unfortunately we relied on an article from *People of Faith Against the Death Penalty* as our source. They in turn relied on an article from the *Los Angeles Times* which conflated the bishops' statement about intrinsic evil with their stated opposition to the death penalty. A careful reading of *Faithful Citizenship* shows that the two topics were treated separately. There is a lesson here for us: always check your secondary sources' sources. We apologize to you and your readers for the inaccuracy.

The inaccuracy is the more unfortunate since the bishops speak emphatically and clearly about their opposition to the death penalty. Their statements on this issue need no strengthening by reinterpretation, mistaken or otherwise. They refer to the death penalty along with other *"serious threats to life and human dignity"* as *"serious moral issues that challenge our consciences and require us to act"*. *Ibid.*, #29.

We include the bishops' statements urging an end to capital punishment in our Holy Week bulletin every year to remind us that Jesus was also a victim of the death penalty, and that we are saved by love and not by violence.

Please feel free to use any or all of this for your readers as an apology and correction.

Peace,

Anne and Bill Werdel

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty." *If the inmate responds, you might consider becoming pen pals.*

Please write to:.....

Jerry W. Connor #0085045 (On death row since 4/30/91)

Isaac J. Stroud #0478925 (2/9/95)

James E. Thomas #040386 (2/24/95)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. Two new CDs Available: **"FIRST IMPRESSIONS PREACHING REFLECTIONS"** **"Liturgical year A,"** which begins in Advent and contains **three** reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts for the year. It also has book reviews and additional essays related to preaching.

"Liturgical years, A, B and C," reflections on the three-year cycle.

If you are a preacher, lead a Lectionary-based scripture group, or are a member of a liturgical team, these CDs will be helpful in your preparation process. Individual worshipers report they also use these reflections as they prepare for Sunday liturgy.

You can order the CDs by going to our webpage: www.preacherexchange.com and clicking on the "First Impressions" CDs link on the left.

2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use "First Impressions" in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)

3. Our webpage: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>

Where you will find "Preachers' Exchange," which includes "First Impressions" and "Homilias Dominicales," as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.

4. "Homilias Dominicales"-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Jose David Padilla, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like "First Impressions", "Homilias Dominicales" are a preacher's early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and

liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive “Homilias Dominicales” drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: Jboll@opsouth.org or jboll@preacherexchange.org

5. "First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

DONATIONS

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh.

Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>

Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA

P.O. Box 12927, Raleigh, N.C. 27605, (919) 833-1893, Email: judeop@juno.com