

FIRST IMPRESSIONS EASTER SUNDAY

Acts 10: 34a, 37-43 Ps. 118 Colossians 3: 1-4 (or I Cor 5: 6-8) John 20: 1-9

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Darkness is the atmosphere for our gospel story today. At least that is how the story begins: there is the darkness that opens the story (“while it was still dark”); the darkness of the empty tomb; the darkness of not knowing; the darkness of loss; the darkness of shock because of what the disciples had seen of Jesus’ capture, torture and death. Darkness travels through the story; until the “other disciple” went into the tomb, “saw and believed.”

Both Peter and the other disciple saw the same things: the empty tomb and the burial cloths neatly folded. But the other disciple saw with a light that was not physically present in the tomb. He saw with the same light Jesus gave the blind man (John 9: 1-41) who, after he got his physical sight and had to explain what happened to him to the religious authorities, began to see who Jesus was at a much deeper level. When Jesus came back to find him after his trials he asked the man if he believed in the Son of Man. The man said, “Tell me who he is sir that I might believe in him.” Jesus responded, “You are looking at him. He is speaking with you now.” The man then professed his new faith in Jesus, “I do believe sir.” He now had a sight that would enable him to see in a new way, with the eyes of faith.

If Jesus’ body had been in the tomb when Mary got there, then the Christian faith we would have had would be merely the memory of a wise, miraculous and compassionate founder. We would have his example to live by and teach our children. “What would Jesus do?” would be our guiding principle for daily behavior. We would reflect on his life’s teaching and try to deduce what he might do today---twenty centuries after his powerful witness in the ancient Middle East. We would have had one among many great religious teachers in our human history. But the body wasn’t there, it was gone.

Some have posited possible reasons for why Mary found an empty tomb. Mary voices one explanation; “They have taken the Lord from the tomb.” Who could “they” be? Maybe the military powers stole the body to keep Jesus’ followers from making a shrine to the one the Romans saw as a peasant revolutionary. They

would have wanted to keep the crowds, who heard Jesus preach and saw him work wonders, from making their way to the tomb to venerate his memory and then unite to attempt to overthrow their oppressors. Or perhaps “they” were the religious leaders who felt so challenged by Jesus and did all they could to silence him. They would have been suspected of stealing the body, lest his followers use Jesus’ tomb as a way of promoting his teachings and rejecting those of their own religious leaders.

Some have tried to explain the absence of the body and the appearances of the risen Lord to his disciples in this way. Perhaps Jesus’ followers were so overcome by their loss and grief that the risen Christ was a figment of their imagination. They thought they saw him risen because they wanted to and in their hysteria, they ran out to “spread the word.” So, we believers, who gather in church today, are the result of their grief-filled, fictitious hysteria. That’s a scary thought isn’t it, on this Easter Sunday? How are we worshippers going to prove the resurrection? We can’t.

At this stage of the gospel story, we can identify with those who looked into the empty tomb. We certainly know many who, like Peter looking into the empty tomb, draw no conclusion at what they see in their lives or in the lives of believers. Darkness permeates their lives, as it does in today’s gospel. But there is a beam of light at the end of the story when “the other disciple whom Jesus loved,” peered into the tomb and though he saw what the others did---he believed. Seeing, in John’s gospel, is symbolic for seeing with the eyes of faith. The beloved disciple “saw and believed.”

That’s what we are invited to do: see what the beloved disciple saw and believe in the Risen Christ. We certainly can’t prove he is alive by reasoning or referring to historic proofs. The tomb is empty, and many people have their own explanations for what happened. And we have what we have: we believe Jesus Christ, who died on the cross was raised to a new and transformed life. That we, the beloved disciples, even without seeing, believe in his new life. And more.

We believe that the Risen Christ has won a victory over death for us. He has given us, not only a memory and guidelines for living, but that his new life has poured his Spirit into us. We believe what Paul tells us in today’s Colossian’s reading: we are “raised with Christ,” so that now we are enabled to live the life Christ lived, not

merely because of his example, but because he has given us a new life.

There are very good people in our world whose lives reflect love and care for others. They are examples of compassion for the needy and generous of their time for those who need their help. They live very good lives without a belief in the Risen Christ and his revelation of God's love for the world. Their goodness challenges us to ask: suppose the tomb were not empty when Mary and the disciples got there; or suppose the disciples' first explanation was correct, that indeed "they" had stolen Jesus' body? Wouldn't we still be good and decent people who use our gifts and talents in a responsible way to help others in the human family---without having faith in the Risen One? Probably.

But we wouldn't have, as part of our lives, what we have come to know about the earthly Jesus. He wouldn't be our primary influence and model. He is the one who has shown, by his life, how to live a fully human life; how to live and die for the sake of others. We wouldn't be informed by his example of love and compassion, nor would we have his teachings to guide us.

And more! We wouldn't have the Risen Christ, the one whom Peter describes today in Acts, who gives believers "forgiveness of sins through his name." Paul says in Colossians that we are raised with Christ. Faith gives us a vision our mortal eyes cannot. While others merely see an empty tomb and have their suspicions, we believe Christ continues to be with us, empowering us with his new life against death in all its subtle and obvious manifestations. It is the Risen Christ who continues to reveal God's ongoing love and forgiveness to us in such a way that we are empowered to show that love and forgiveness to others

There has been much discussion in the church about how one comes to faith in the Risen Lord. Are appearances required? Apparently not, since the beloved disciple comes to believe at the empty tomb. Nor have we had the personal encounters with Christ like the ones Mary Magdalen, and the other disciples will have subsequent to today's passage. Our faith in the Risen Christ comes by our birth in water and the Spirit. We are like the disciple who peered into the empty tomb and believed. We too can see because, like the blind man, we have been washed in the pool of Siloam, our baptismal waters.

And now, with our sight, what can we see? Do we see what our physical eyes

cannot? Do we see the Risen Christ in the poor and suffering around us? Has the Risen Christ opened our eyes to recognize that winning and power are not the automatic solutions to every problem or confrontation? Can we see that being able to have all we want does not mean we should; that others in the world suffer want because of our personal and national excesses? Have we recognized the kingdom of God in daily mustard-seed efforts to do good in the world? Can we see that our own dying to self is a sign of a greater life at work in us that is leading us to a fuller and eternal life?

We join the disciples today as they peer into the empty tomb. We, with the beloved disciple see more. We see a new life set loose in the world; we see possibilities for change in ourselves and in the world that are now available to us through the One we believe is risen from the dead.

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: **“FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR A.”** The CD contains two reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of the year. In addition, there are helpful essays for preaching during the liturgical seasons (Advent, Lent, the Triduum, etc.), ten book reviews and essays on various aspects of preaching. The files are in three formats (Microsoft Word, WordPerfect and Adobe Acrobat Reader) so you should have no trouble opening them on your computer. To purchase go to: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> click on the “Year A–CD” button on the right and follow the instructions.
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 webpages: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> and <http://www.opsouth.org/> (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.

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

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