

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” EASTER VIGIL (B)

Gn 1: 1-22; Gn 22: 1-8; 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; Mark 16: 1-7

Dear Preachers:

(Nine readings are offered for the Easter Vigil: seven are from the Hebrew Scriptures and two from the New Testament. Some may be omitted, but usually three are read from the Hebrew text before the Epistle and Gospel. The Exodus reading should be read.)

For those of us who have experienced the death of loved ones over this last year, this feast brings a message of comfort. Our bonds with our beloved dead are not perpetually broken, left in ashes. Our faith assures us that we, with them, will rise again. Those of us approaching the end of our lives because of sickness or advanced age, are also encouraged today. What seems like a certain victory for death, is not. God has the last laugh over death and so our faith assuages our fears.

But this feast isn't just about the next life. Resurrection also challenges us for this life; what difference will the resurrection make for us now? There is enough evidence in our world to urge us to stay in whatever tomb we dwell. The world is a scary place, especially these days and withdrawal from meaningful engagement with it is a temptation. We have lots of help if we want to skip out and disengage alcohol, work, long hours in front of the tv (cf. Below, “Channeling our Energy”), going through the motions until retirement, avoiding the large social problems around us, etc. We can take refuge in the day-to-day routine; it numbs us and facilitates our exemption from new life. For those injured by life, the fear of the unknown future also keeps us in the tomb. The heavy stone that covers a possible exit to new life helps us stay sheltered and protected from what seems threatening - ---and yet, holds the promise of renewal. The resurrection says God has other plans for us. God does not leave us on our own as we face the heavy task of emergence from the tomb. What the women saw as an insurmountable burden (“Who will roll back the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?”), God was already addressing. The stone was removed, and new life had already left the place of death and is spreading that life just up ahead in Galilee.

The young man at the tomb, dressed as a heavenly messenger, refers to “Jesus of

Nazareth, the crucified.” The emphasis here is on the human Jesus. The references to Jesus as a Nazarene and as the one crucified, are also derogatory terms. He is from a small town, not respected by the more urbane people of Jerusalem (“Can anything good come from Nazareth?”) and he was crucified— he suffered the death of a criminal. Yet this very one from Nazareth and crucified as a criminal, the messenger tells the women, has been raised. This is Isaiah’s suffering servant whom we heard about yesterday, Good Friday (Isaiah 52:13-53-12), the one who was misunderstood, rejected, condemned and executed. What a complete reversal that has just happened!

But the resurrection comes only through Jesus’ death--- he is “the crucified.” Mark won’t let us forget that the shadow of the cross is still present in this new age inaugurated by Jesus’ resurrection. Our world may not believe in the resurrection; the word may be very strange to moderns. But people certainly know about the cross and suffering. Even unbelievers will say, “I have a heavy cross to bear.” We keep the crosses of our world in mind as we celebrate the resurrection; the cross casts its long shadow over our earth and its peoples. The messenger reminds us that our God is no stranger to pain. God isn’t just the God of sunsets, pretty flowers and innocent children. A sober appraisal of our world will not allow us such a clean, sterile God. We look at the killings in Iraq, the 20 million with AIDS in Africa; the 25% of our children in this country below the poverty line; slavery and spousal abuse, etc. Jesus is called the “crucified one,” and we are reminded that our God entered our world, the world we know all too well, whose sorrow seems to dwarf the “lilies of the field” and the “birds of the air.”

We gathered with the suffering messiah and the tormented of the world at the cross on Good Friday. We believed our God was there with us, despite the fact that we got no immediate answers and were defeated. Evil seemed so large and powerful, we felt impotent and dwarfed. We need Good Friday to remind us that we are not alone in our suffering; God is no stranger to our pain. In Jesus, God too has lost everything in death. After it was all over, we asked the same question the women did, “Who will roll away the stone?” Who will open the tomb; who will set us free and destroy death? On Good Friday and Holy Saturday, we and the women weren’t thinking too optimistically; we weren’t thinking “Springtime thoughts.” Dead bodies don’t rise on their own. But the Genesis story tonight reminds us that God can create from nothing. God spoke over the formless wasteland and into the darkness of the abyss and created light. God can completely reverse a helpless

situation. And God did; for while God stood with us at the cross on Good Friday, God has also acted boldly and unexpectedly on Easter morning. Once again, as in Genesis, God spoke a mighty word, this time into the tomb's darkness. Again, God created light for us. God rolled away the stone of death with a life-giving word. God now turns towards us as we ask the women's question, "Who will roll back the stone for us?" God responds, "I will."

This story should give us courage to face what has died in our lives and we can be reassured that God stands with us as we grieve our deaths. But God still has something new in store for us. Each of us knows Good Friday; but we are not stuck there. Though we have reached a dead end, some new life will be shown to us, some new possibility up ahead in will open for us. We believe the messenger's words, "He is going before you to Galilee."

The young man's announcement to the women, "He has been raised; he is not here," becomes our shout at this liturgy, "Christ is risen!" We love this feast, it bursts upon us with song, drama and color after a drab Lent. But after the glow, does its reality stay with us? So often we have seen good defeated by hostile forces and declared "Finished." ("Nice try, but you lose.") Today we celebrate God's choice to be with our vulnerable humanity, engage death and come out victorious. Now we are asked to believe, with the women, the message at the empty tomb; to take seriously that God has exposed the lies death has given us. Today's gospel ends with us holding our breath. Will the woman and we, struck with amazement go out following the trail of the risen Christ and trust he will be with us each time we face down death's debilitating effects on our lives?

Mark has avoided the spectacular in his account. There is nothing extraordinary about the young man at the tomb or in the fact that the stone was rolled away. In fact, this passage originally ended with the very next verse, "When the women ran from the tomb, they were confused and shaking all over. They were too afraid to tell anyone what had happened" (12:8). The women go off and tell no one what they have seen. In the original ending there were no appearance stories of the resurrected Christ. By the messenger's emphasizing Jesus' humanity ("Jesus of Nazareth") and his suffering ("the crucified"), Mark is downplaying the glorious and emphasizing Jesus' sharing our human condition. Mark wants his persecuted Christian community to soberly reflect on the meaning of the resurrection in its

own struggling life. He seems to encourage them to face their fears and doubts with hope. To their question, “When will we finally see him?” Mark provides the response to that question in the messenger’s promise, that Jesus is up ahead, in Galilee, the place they expected to meet him when he did return at the end of time in his glory. We will see the glory Mark is suggesting. That is what now sustains us with hope amid our doubts and struggles.

“Channeling Our Energy”

Percentage of U.S. households with at least one television: 98

Percentage of U.S. household with three or more TV’s: 40

Times per day a TV is on in an average U.S. home: 7 hours, 40 minutes.

Percentage of Americans who always or often watch TV while eating dinner: 40

Chance that an American falls asleep with the TV on at least three nights a week: 1 in 4

Percentage of Americans who say they watch too much TV: 49

Number of videos rented daily in the U.S.: 6 million

Amount of TV the average American watches per day: more than 4 hours.

Amount of TV the average American 1-year-old watches per week: 6 hours.

Hours per year the average American youth spends in school: 900

Hours per year the average American youth spends watching TV: 1,023

—Compiled by TV-Turnoff Network, quoted in the N.Y. Times Magazine Section, Feb. 16, 2003, page 9.

QUOTABLE

Christianity is not merely a religion that was marketed well with just the right political spin by gifted writers. It is a living, breathing, ongoing conversation between God, humanity and all creation empowered by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Without the resurrection, there would have been no Christianity, no Christendom, no hymns, no seminaries, no churches and no nativity scenes. Jesus lives, not in the sense that King Lear or Hamlet or Handel’s Messiah live on in the hearts and minds of the people, but in the sense that something totally new has happened and keeps happening. The resurrection is the ultimate breakthrough of God into our world that transcends all nature and history.

Without it, we wouldn't care one whit about Bethlehem and the manger, which is why every year my wife and I try to send Easter letters instead of Christmas cards and I congratulate all the once-a-year visitors for choosing Easter above all others. At least they picked the right Sunday to come!

—William J. Carl III, in "The Living Pulpit" (January-March 1998).

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."*

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- Randy L. Atkins #0021311 (On death row since 12/8/93)
- Sammy Perkins #0319156 (12/15/93)
- William Gray #0153856 (12/16/92)
- Terry Ball #0017060 (2/3/94)

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

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Thank you.

"Blessings on your preaching",

Jude Siciliano, OP
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