

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS”

Holy Thursday (Exodus 12: 1-8, 11-14 1Cor. 11: 23-26 John 13: 1-15)

Easter Vigil (Mark 16: 1-7)

Easter Sunday: Acts 10:34, 37-43; Col 3: 1-4; John 20: 1-9

Dear Preachers:

This is a packed time for preachers, especially in settings where the bulk of this week's preaching falls on one or two of us. As I look at the preaching schedule ahead, I find myself drawn to the gospels of both Holy Thursday and the Vigil service. I have also included a note on John's Passion narrative for Good Friday. Thanks, this week to Connie Schoen, O.P. for her justice reflections on Easter Sunday. I hope these are of help in your very busy schedule.

Holy Thursday. Chapter 13 in John brings a major shift in this gospel. It closes the first part called “the Book of Signs,” the account of Jesus' public ministry. Now we enter the second half of the gospel, called the Book of Glory (chps. 13-17). The word “love” is a key word in this section: Jesus will call his disciples to love and will show them the kind of love he has in mind by offering himself for them. The grain of wheat will die and bear much fruit, as he predicted (5th. Sunday of Lent). The opening verse of this section (13:1) links the final hours of Jesus' life with the Passover. (Hence the choice of the first reading from Exodus, the account of the origins of the Passover. Jesus will die at the hour the Passover lambs are slaughtered for sacrifice in the Temple.) What is going to happen to Jesus, his long-awaited “hour,” is going to complete the meaning of the Passover. The blood of the lamb painted on the lintels of their doors saved the Jews from the angel of death. The blood of this Lamb is going to save all from the death that sin has caused. Jesus isn't just setting a good example for us as he washes his disciples feet; what he is initiating from this point on in the gospel will save us from the pervasive power of sin over our lives.

Foot washings were a part of hospitality in this culture. The roads were dusty and guests coming for a visit or meal would welcome the chance to have the dust from the road washed from their feet. Normally the washing would have been done before the meal and was the task of the youngest or lowliest servant or slave. The importance of the event is underscored by Jesus' breaking the pattern of what was customary and acceptable: he interrupts the meal and does the washings himself. His final hour is at hand and he is already emptying himself. His dying has begun; our new life is about to begin. In fact, a sign of the community's new life brought about by Jesus' action will be that they will be “foot-washers,” servants to the

needy among them. But much more is implied by his actions.

Peter objects to Jesus' humiliation in front of his disciples, he does not want his feet washed. But Peter is no dummy. Maybe he also sees what is implied in Jesus' actions: if the Master is doing this then Peter may already suspect that the disciples will have to do likewise—himself included. Jesus insists that if Peter is to have any part in his inheritance, he must allow Jesus to wash his feet. And sure enough, he learns that the “inheritance” will include washing the feet of others. Peter must also be a lowly servant in the household where Jesus dwells. However, he will not be required to have a total bath again. As the disciple travels through life in the world, he/she picks up soil from the road. A full bath (another baptism?) is not necessary; but a washing is. We can be washed from our sins and refreshed and renewed as we sit down to the table with other disciples to eat the Passover meal of Jesus.

John is writing for a community like our own who, since their baptism, have many things from which they need cleansing. This account is encouraging for the community members who have failed, as Peter did, to live up to their Christian calling. After he betrayed Jesus, Peter must have been heartened by his remembrance of this incident, and the possibility Jesus holds out to be washed from the soil of the road. Since the incident also took place at the table, the suggestion is that forgiveness is offered us through the meal we share in remembrance of Jesus. In our Eucharist, the first thing we do is ask for forgiveness of our failings. It's as if each eucharistic meal begins with a foot washing. And we are the grateful recipients as we are reminded that what Jesus did for Peter, he does for us.

Thus, there is another way we can imitate the example of the One we call “teacher and master.” We can follow the example he set for us. Besides the call to service, so evident in the foot washing, another response Jesus may be asking of us tonight is to forgive one another as he has forgiven us. Since the ritual will be performed in many places of worship this day, we may want to look around at who else is present at the table with us and wash their feet by forgiving them what we hold against them.

Easter Vigil: Mark 16: 1-7

Death shatters our world; it separates us from our loved ones and causes many painful shifts in the routine of our lives. With death we experience the loss of what is good in human existence; love and friendship, security and the familiar. We

lose our plans and a chunk of our future when death makes its unwelcome entrance. All must change when we are forced to make room for death.

The women who went to the tomb were well acquainted with death. They knew what to do when death robbed them of a loved one, they had learned the customary routine from their parents and from other women. They may even have been very practiced at what they were planning to do that day; in their world of poverty and enslavement, death was an all too frequent visitor. It all seemed too familiar to them as they made their way to the tomb for the ceremonies; the final farewell to One they loved, the One who seemed to promise them an entirely different future. They were to anoint and arrange the body, say their goodbyes, reseal the tomb, survive the grief, and live life as best they could.

The power of death had an impressive batting average —batting 1000. No escaping death. They weren't having Springtime thoughts about flowers coming from the dead earth, or caterpillars becoming butterflies. We use metaphors like that to illustrate the wonders of the resurrection now because our faith has taught us to see death in a different way. But not these women, they had no basis for any hope. They were doing the logical thing brought on by life's cruel realities. They also had a practical concern as they made their way: who would roll away the heavy stone that sealed the tomb? Death is a big stone to roll away from our world and we are only humans. Death is so powerful and has so many guises: violence, corruption, racism, sexism, war, oppression, decay, hopelessness, disappointment and the rest of a seeming endless list. They have us locked in the tomb and we are not strong enough to roll them away.

This resurrection account should give us the courage to face what is dead in our lives and our world. God is with us to help us roll away the stones and enable us to be courageous when we meet our human limits. Reflecting on this Keith A. Russell (LIVING PULPIT MAGAZINE, Jan-March 1998, page 21) says: "From this perspective Easter is not the triumph over the idea of death; it is the discovery of life in the midst of the experience of death. It is the experience that God's presence makes a difference in how we live our lives and deal with our losses. With death being present in so much of our experience, the promise of God's presence is power, power that helps us to develop both courage and action. Easter helps us face not just a future reality but the manifold manifestations of death's power present in our lives now."

Actually, the women did not do as they were told. The next verse in the story, not

part of today's reading, says, "They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." That was their response to the announcement of the resurrection and is the way Mark probably ended his gospel. Later Christians felt a need to round out the story, they added more to the resurrection accounts. But the original ending has a "reasonable" sound to it, doesn't it? The Good News was just too good to believe, too good to be true. The first disciples had so much "common sense" about them, like us. Resurrection was just not in their way of thinking. It's a shame today's selection doesn't include the original ending, the next verse. For we are in a similar situation as the women: can we believe the Good News that has been handed on to us without visible proofs? Can we proceed to follow Jesus to Galilee? Mark may be inviting us not to be afraid this night as we hear the proclamation at the tomb. The very places that seem hopelessly dead, that show no reasonable signs of future life or new possibilities, may be the places we are invited to return to with new hope after this service.

Jesus has gone ahead of us, we are told. He has done this frequently in Mark's gospel-- walk on ahead of his slow and reluctant disciples. He has gone to Galilee and there we will see him. He is still up ahead of us, and we are called to follow in his way: care for the needy, share the hope we have with the downcast, and announce the encouraging words we have heard from him about God's reign. We will continue to do this now that we have been empowered by his resurrection and are filled with the hope that he is waiting up ahead for us.

Justice Reflection for EASTER SUNDAY: Acts 10:34, 37-43; Col 3: 1-4;
John 20: 1-9
Connie Schoen, OP (Promoter of Preaching, Oxford, Michigan)

One of the greatest preaching challenges is to proclaim Easter Resurrection in the midst of world history. We can be enticed to a place of comfort too easily and too soon. The Christian church celebrates and places all of its hope in Jesus the Christ, risen from the dead. We proclaim a God of life whose love cannot be pierced, shattered, or destroyed by even the most grotesque and obscene forms of evil and darkness. There is nothing and no one beyond the embrace of God, pure love. In the face of Divine love, not even death can prevail.

Peter recounts how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power as he went about doing good and healing all those oppressed by the devil. Jesus' life reflected the very compassion of God. Jesus' life reflected God's deepest desire for the salvation, the wholeness of all of humanity. We might remember, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" The Resurrection is God's final and definitive

answer to our every imaginable fear.

The truth of the Resurrection and its deepest meanings unfold as we go with Mary Magdalene to the tomb, while it is still dark, and see the stone removed. Yes, we rejoice and shout alleluia because Jesus is risen. But, even more, we are to recognize the power of the Risen One to move away the stones from our tombs. Lest we succumb to the notion that the "Resurrection" is an ancient event, we proclaim and claim, again and again, God's anointing so that 21st century disciples too, go about doing good. The good that is called for is nothing less than the radical undoing of every conceivable act, word, and thought of violence. Those who "see and believe" as John did, are awakened to the insanity of the deaths of 5,000 Iraqi children every month, grieved by the absurd inconsistency of "pro-life" and "pro-death penalty," anguished by the death of innocence as a handgun wielding 6-year-old bears the disfigured marks of his adult role models.

St. Irenaeus once said that "the glory of God is the [human person] fully alive." Resurrection is participation in the glory of God; resurrection is life in all its fullness. We search and keep vigil, like Mary Magdalene, until the darkness gives way to the fullness of dawning light and the good, which God has prepared for us in Christ Jesus, moves the stones of fear and death. There shall be no more violence on God's holy mountain.

QUOTABLE:

(I will not be commenting on the Passion from John's Gospel, but this quote may be informative if you are preaching on Good Friday, when John's Passion is read.)

This passion narrative is read in the liturgy every year on Good Friday, but not without context; for the Johannine Gospel is read daily in the preceding three weeks of Lent and throughout the subsequent Easter Season. Such a context is important for understanding the passion since the Jesus who comes at last to his hour (Jn 13:1) in the Fourth Gospel is a different dramatic character from the Jesus of the Synoptic passion narratives. He is a Jesus conscious of his pre-existence. Through death, therefore, he is returning to a state he has temporarily left during his stay in this world (17:5). He is not a victim at the mercy of his opponents since he has freely chosen to lay down his life with the utter certitude that he will take it up again (1:17-18). If there is an element of struggle in the passion, it is a struggle without suspense, for the Satanic prince of this world has no power over Jesus (14:30); indeed, Jesus has already conquered the world (16:33). Since the Johannine Jesus is omniscient (2: 25; 6:6, etc.), he cannot be caught off guard by

what will happen in the passion. He had chosen Judas knowing that Judas was going to betray him (6: 70-71) and he himself sent Judas off on his evil mission (13: 27-30).

—Raymond Brown in, A CRUCIFIED CHRIST IN HOLY WEEK: ESSAYS ON THE FOUR GOSPEL PASSION NARRATIVES. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1986, page 57.

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“Blessings on your preaching”,
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