

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 2<sup>ND</sup>. SUNDAY OF EASTER (B)

Acts 4: 32-35 Psalm 118 I John 5: 1-6 John 20: 19-31

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

I am reminded of the "Risus Paschalis." Apparently it was a medieval custom (and one in the Eastern Church now) that the preaching for Easter Sunday consisted of jokes. The message being that on this day we enjoy the cosmic laugh, we celebrate that God has outwitted the devil and overcome death. God has the final laugh. So, we look to see what there is in today's readings to cause us to laugh, for death has been overcome.

Jesus' promises to his disciples have been fulfilled and today's Gospel reading has the fulfillment spelled out: his presence will stay with them, forgiveness is granted, peace and eternal life are given. We hear Jesus blessing believers, people who look at their lives and the world with new eyes, the eyes of faith. These are people who can do what Thomas did, see wounds and suffering and look at them with believer's eyes. In the suffering places new life is possible. What in our lives needs to be looked at again? And what needs to be acted on, believing that the Risen Lord will work through us? We may even need to defy the "logical" in order to see the new possibilities. Can we "see" new opportunities in what we once counted as failure? Can we believe in ourselves and that we can make the difference?

Remember that in today's passage, the believers are being sent, the experience they are having is not to be kept to themselves. Thus, Easter is more than a moment in the past. It is a new direction for us to get us out of our stuckness into action. This is the Sunday after Easter. Last week we had all the excitement, this week things are back to "normal." But don't we always need to see with Easter eyes? Don't we need to see that Resurrection permeates everything we look at, and calls us to reappraise what we may have declared "dead and buried," "hopeless," and "useless"? These stories tell us of a community sent to see things anew. Doubters that we are, we need to look again, even at what is wounded and see what we must do to enable new life. Past doubts and perceptions can clutter our thoughts these days. Belief in the Jesus story will enable us to look beyond what is doubtful and pull back the curtains in hope.

The community was locked behind closed doors. It certainly isn't the idyllic

picture we often hear of the early community. Why would this story be saved and handed on to John's community unless his community was also scared and tempted to stay locked up? We need to hear this story as well. Perhaps there is little to mark us as Christians. We fit in too easily, we have a slot in our culture, and we are right at home. Where is our voice when injustice is being done? Why are we not a more prophetic people?

Even with the erratic swings in the Nasdaq and the Dow in recent weeks, we are in a very prosperous period. We in the church are celebrating a year of Jubilee, a time to be more conscious that, with unprecedented prosperity, there are still social inequalities in our world. In the light of the Jubilee, some statistics published by "Bread For the World" should stir our conscience and nudge us out from behind locked doors. They cause us to look around at our own country and beyond the borders to our world. While some in our society experience riches never before known in the history of the world:

- 35,000-person die of hunger and its consequences every day around the world
- more than 80% of the world's people live in developing countries. They use just 20% of the world's wealth. The remaining 20% of the world's people live in industrialized nations and control 80% of the world's wealth
- women perform 2/3 of the world's work but receive 1/10 of its income and own less than 1/100 of its property
- as of 1995, developing nations owed foreign creditors more than \$2 trillion. The cost of providing relief for the 20 nations worst affected by the international debt burden would be \$6 billion, less than the cost of one stealth bomber
- in Uganda, the government spends \$3.50 per person annually on health and education and \$17 per person annually on debt relief
- the debt of the world's poorest countries has reached crisis proportions. Repayments to rich governments and international financial institutions uses up money that should be spent on health care, education and anti-poverty programs
- the United Nations estimates that because of this, 19,000 children are dying every day in Africa alone
- 26,000 people, mostly civilians, are maimed or killed every year by antipersonnel land mines.
- more then 20 million people worldwide have been displaced due to human conflict or forced relocation. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, one in every two persons has been displaced.

We recall the Catholic Bishops' pastoral on the economy. Written in 1986, when

we had 33 million poor people, the bishops called this a moral scandal in our affluent nation. While many have grown enormously rich over these past years, the gap between the rich and the poor has widened. Our political leaders have little to say about this moral scandal and we followers of Christ seem to be behind locked doors, afraid to stick our heads out. Yet Jesus, who was rejected and is known by his wounds, is sending his disciples out to bring in others into his community. This community has the ideals of its Founder (cf. the first reading), it is a community where no one "was needy among them." Care for the neediest, in an otherwise selfish and bloated society, might be the powerful sign to others that he who died poor and oppressed, lives.

Let's look at Thomas. He is another reminded that for some of us, faith doesn't come easily. In John's resurrection accounts there are interesting pairings of people who believe and others who do not. Today's story is such an account; the believing disciples are paired with the doubting Thomas. His response of faith comes with difficulty and after trial. So too for some of us, we continually wrestle with our faith and what relevance it has in our complex world. It doesn't come easily for us and John shows in these accounts that there is room for all of us; for those who simply accept and for those who wrestle and question. Thomas eventually comes to resolution, and this is an encouragement to us all who struggle to believe.

John Kavanaugh's reflections are helpful and take another approach. He notes Jesus' emphasis on forgiveness. Perhaps Jesus is addressing the divisiveness in the early community. Note that Thomas refuses to believe a primary tenet expressed by the community, "We have seen the Lord." Thomas, is the first Christian to dissent formally from a fundamental conviction of the church. Despite this division in its ranks, the early community seems to welcome Thomas into its midst; after all he is there with them the next week. Thomas has not been rejected from the very community he challenges.

Our church is divided into clashing camps, one side wishing the other would just go away. We would exclude "them" as we accuse them of not being "true Catholics." Such divisions cause the whole church to suffer. At least Thomas, and all of us, can gather professing Christ as our core, our primary relationship in faith. In such a gathering, forgiveness can take place and profound Resurrection faith be expressed.

The selection we have today was the original conclusion to John's Gospel. So the

evangelist is clearly stating the purpose of the Gospel, to encourage faith. The last words of the Gospel then were a blessing, "so that through this faith you may have life in his name."

## JUSTICE REFLECTIONS: SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER, APRIL 30<sup>TH</sup> (John 20:19-31)

Sometime ago I read a quote from Mary O'Driscoll, OP, which has stuck with me, and which seems to go to the basic injustice at the root of many issues. She said: "Whenever we as a human family or as church gather in either small or large groups to celebrate or to make plans for the future or to search for God's truth for ourselves and our world, we need likewise to look around and ask: *Who's missing? Who's not here who should be here?*"

Today's Gospel offers two ways to reach this question. Jesus stands in the midst of his frightened disciples and offers them Peace. When people in our time hear the word *peace*, it seems we most often think of it in terms of the absence of conflict or war. But the Biblical word *shalom* means so much more than that. It means wholeness in all of our relationships, with ourselves, our families, our neighbors, our brothers and sisters in countries around the world, our environment, our God. Peace cannot exist apart from justice and righteousness. To truly experience the peace of Jesus we need to include all people, especially the most likely to be ignored and forgotten, in our decision making, in our communities.

Thomas, who was not present when Jesus came, needed to experience the body of the Risen Lord before he could believe. Where do we touch the body of the Risen Lord today? Again, the preacher has an opportunity to apply this to his/her own situation and to ask who is being left out here, where this word of God is being broken open today?

In my situation I can think of two immediate examples, which relate to larger justice issues. First of all, although our parish is largely Spanish-surnamed, we have our own group of people who get easily ignored. Most of our parishioners speak English as well as Spanish and have lived in this area for generations. But there is also a smaller but growing group of people recently arrived from Mexico who speak only Spanish or very limited English. When organizations such as the Parish Council or Parish Youth Group meet, unless someone specifically asks, "Who is missing? Who is not represented here?" the needs of those who only speak Spanish are easily left out. This happens as well on the village and county

level. Our parish community needs to provide a voice for the voiceless.

We also live in an area where there has been a great deal of gold mining, in the past and more recently by a large corporation who did a great deal of damage to the land and the water system of the Alamosa River. All the ranchers and farmers depend on the river for water for crops and herds. Right now the water is unable to support aquarian life and is so full of heavy metals that it erodes and destroys irrigation dams and waterways. Did anyone at the mine ask himself or herself how what they were doing affected the environment and the people downstream? Or did they just make decisions based on how much money they could get?

-----Rene Weeks, OP

### ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

A recommendation for a book from one of our readers. Ron Stanley, OP writes:

You likely already know and have featured this book, and I don't generally read books on preaching. However, the following book was sent out to all of our houses by our provincial, Steve Fitzhenry, OP and I got to it during Spring Break and found it quite good. It is only 130 pages and makes basic points clearly and cogently.

### PREACHING BETTER: PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR HOMILISTS

by Ken Untener, Bishop of Saginaw

ISBN 0-8091-3849-2

### ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Thank you. - "Blessings on your preaching",

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