

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER (B)
Acts 3: 13-15, 17-19 Psalm 4 I John 2: 1-5a Luke 24: 35-48
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

To our modern ears the scripture stories sound quaint and old-fashioned. They are about fishing in small boats with hand-tossed nets; sandals, staffs and walking dusty roads; shepherds and farmers who sow seed. We almost dismiss these stories. We imagine it was easier to believe “back then.” We are long removed from their lives, with our modern jet travel, mass produced food, fish farms, daily commutes, e-commerce and computer viruses. But we can hear in stories like today’s gospel passage, that they had the same daily struggles we have. We may be dressed in modern clothes and drive gas guzzlers, but like them, we too struggle with life and death, love and forgiveness. We ask the same questions to life’s disappointments as they did, “Why?”

I am glad that story says the disciples doubted Jesus was really alive--- I would have too. I am glad Luke describes them today as “startled and terrified” when Jesus appears in their midst---I would have been too. Jesus notes the disciples are “troubled”---I would have been too and I too would have had questions arise in my heart, as they had. “Me too!” Our ancestors in faith showed the same responses we would have, had we been in their situation. And I am glad they wrote down this story for us—we who are troubled, who sometimes are startled and terrified by what we face in life----we who have questions.

They are telling us, their descendants in faith, “Yes, we had troubles and doubts too.” “Yes we felt darkness.” “Yes, death took all we had and had hoped in.” “Yes, he seemed like just a ghost to us.” But they also add something important for us. They are also saying, “But he wasn’t just a ghost. He’s not dead, not a figment of our imagination, like a ghost. We saw him, watched him eat before our eyes. He was the same as we had known him, but oh, so much more! He walked our journey. He knew the darkness of disappointment and pain. And now he walks the journey we walk and enables us to find life where till now there has been death.”

The stories seem quaint on the surface, but they are about real issues; they speak to what’s on our minds and what troubles our hearts. They strengthen us when we

doubt. These stories, our ancestors in faith handed on to us, are not only for the good days and celebrations of our lives. They are also for when we face darkness, when life feels threatening, when “things go bump in the night” and we are afraid of losing our bearings. God speaks to us through these stories, they are our light in darkness, our compass for when we feel lost. Let’s look at the Acts reading.

Well Peter has certainly changed! On Easter Sunday he entered the empty tomb saw the burial cloths and noticed that the body of Jesus was gone. The “other disciple” entered the tomb, saw the same thing and believed. No response from Peter. Today’s Acts reading shows quite a different person. He is out and about. He and John, on their way to pray at the temple, were met by a cripple beggar. Peter cured the beggar and, as would be expected, the miracle attracted a large crowd. Peter seizes the preaching opportunity and today’s Acts reading is the beginning of his sermon. [Mary Catherine Hilkert, OP, has used this miracle as a stepping-off point for her development of a Roman Catholic theology of preaching. Cf. Below.]

As a result of the cure and their preaching to the people about Jesus’ resurrection, Peter and John are arrested by the priests in charge of the temple, the captain of the temple and the Sadducees (4:1). Peter will give another speech, this time to the Jewish council (4:8 ff). The council was “astonished at the assurance shown by Peter and John considering they were uneducated laypeople; and they recognized them as associates of Jesus...” (4:13). Quite a change in Peter since he looked into the empty tomb! As a result of the cure of the cripple and Peter’s sermon to the crowd, “many of those who had listened to their message became believers, the total number of whom had now risen to something like five thousand” (4:4). That’s an impressive number for a city of about forty thousand. Something has dramatically changed Peter and the rest of Jesus’ disciples. Peter tells the people, “the author of life you put to death, but God raised him from the dead; of this we are witnesses” (3:15).

On Easter Sunday the disciples were huddled in fear behind locked doors; now they are witnesses. Today’s gospel uses the same word—“witnesses.” The gospel narrative picks up with the return of the two disciples who had met the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24: 1-32). The two share their story after they are told of Jesus’ appearance to Simon. Unlike the previous Emmaus encounter with the risen Lord, today’s appearance has more energy and emotion to it. Then Jesus appears quite suddenly to interrupt the conversation between the two Emmaus

disciples and the gathered community. They are “startled and terrified” and he chides them for their doubts. By showing them his wounds, Jesus convinces them he is alive and the same person they followed and saw crucified. They still find it all too much, so as further evidence he is no ghost, he eats a piece of fish. The disciples are finally convinced. Like the previous Emmaus account, in order to open the eyes of the disciples, Jesus explains the scriptures and breaks the bread. (Today’s passage opens with a tie-in to the Emmaus account by making reference to the meal.) Jesus tells them they are to be witnesses to “all these things.” The Acts account also has Peter identifying himself as a witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus. The former fearful disciples, once locked behind closed doors, are now witnesses. They were once inactive and afraid; now they are outgoing and bold.

Something really incredible must have happened in Jerusalem over 2,000 years ago to make such a transformation among a group the Jewish council had declared, “uneducated lay people.” The disciples had seen their charismatic leader crushed by religious and civil powers. They figured, “that was that.” The two who open today’s story were already hightailing it out of Jerusalem for Emmaus when Jesus joined their walk. They shared with the stranger on the road what must have been the thoughts of the entire community, “But we were hoping that he would be the one to redeem Israel....” Disciples in hiding or dispersed, hearts filled with disappointment, suddenly become powerful preachers with a transforming message given them by Jesus in the upper room: Jesus once dead, was alive and forgiveness was now offered “to all the nations.”

We know, from the beginning of Acts, that the disciples’ lives were changed by the resurrection and Jesus’ gift of his Spirit. The scriptures these weeks after Easter will narrate the effects of these two events on the early church. But what about us, so removed from in time and life style? What do we have that will enable us to continue to leave our fears behind and witness to the risen Christ? We note that Peter and John are described as laypeople by the council; so, the role of public witness is not reserved to just the ordained.

Luke seems to be responding to our concerns. The story opens with the reminder of “the breaking of the bread” and Luke tells us that Jesus broke open the scriptures for them—all the principle parts of the Hebrew texts, the prophets, Law of Moses and the Psalms. So too for us; we encounter the same risen Christ when we are assembled to break open the scriptures and the bread. Which is what we are

doing at this eucharistic celebration today. From this sacramental encounter Christ strengthens our faith and sends us to be witness—just as he did for our Christian ancestors.

We witness by living changed lives and voicing our faith. The second reading reminds us that our lives are to be characterized by love. The first community of believers tell us that we who await Jesus' return have his abiding presence with us in: their scriptures; our assembled community; the breaking of the bread and the living presence of the Holy Spirit to guide, encourage and renew us. With these signs of Jesus' living presence we, like the "laypeople," Peter and John, are called to be witnesses.

Today our world needs such witnesses to the Prince of Peace's life. We live in a shattered world, in a fragile peace, threatened by our war and the unsettled conditions in Iraq; the recent saber rattling of Korea; on-going violence in Israel and the cloud of possible future terrorist attacks. Discord surrounds us and rivalry, hatred and anger flourish in our world. The day seems to belong to the most powerful and violent. In addition, our earth, entrusted to us by God, is in need of witnesses to speak for and defend it from further ravishing. Children, the poor and elderly are not respected and often lack voice, immigrants are distrusted and in many places, have suffered personal violence for themselves and their families.

Witnesses to another way are essential if the harmony among us and the harmony with God Jesus proclaimed are to be propagated. "All the nations" —these are the ones Jesus had in mind to receive his message of reconciliation. And we are "the witnesses of these things."

QUOTABLE

It is wonderful to know that after the dawn of Easter, the Bethlehem star will shine again. Mary of Nazareth will outlive Herod the Great and even Pilate....

It is wonderful to know the widow's tears turn to joy and that the Father's arms are always open.

It is wonderful to know that the Last Supper becomes the first Eucharist and that the farewell discourse is about never going away.

It is wonderful to know that the Samaritan finds us and that Peter is forgiven.

It is wonderful to know that the tomb is empty, and our hearts are full

It is wonderful to know that the three women magi announce Easter and that all our

doubts are changed into the bread and wine of faith....

It is wonderful to know that because Christ is risen, you and I are the resurrection and the life.

—Anthony Padovano, CHRISTMAS TO CALVARY: LIFE AND MEMORIES OF JESUS. New York: Paulist Press, 1987, page 82.

JUSTICE NOTES

“American prison population surpasses 2 million, the highest incarceration rate in the world”

For the first time in history, the number of inmates in American prisons and jails has exceeded 2 million. As of June 30, 2002, there were 1.35 million prisoners in State and Federal prisons and an additional 665, 475 in local jails, according to a new report by the Bureau of Justice Statistics. This represents an increase of nearly 2 percent over the first six months of 2002.

1. The rate of incarceration in the United States, 702 inmates per 100,000 residents, continues to be the highest in the world. Among black males 25 to 29, 12.9 percent were in prison or jail. Overall, 4.8 percent of black males were in prison or jails, compared to 1.7 percent of Hispanics and 0.6 percent of whites. Black women in prisons and jails continue to outnumber their white (5 times as many) and Hispanic (more than twice as many) counterparts.

According to criminal justice analysts, the Bureau's report demonstrates state and federal policies continue to drive up incarceration rates despite sharp drops in violent crime rates since 1994 and efforts by many state governors and legislators from both political parties to reduce swollen prison populations and corrections budgets during an economic downturn. "The relentless increases in prison and jail populations can best be explained as the legacy of an entrenched infrastructure of punishment that has been embedded in the criminal justice system over the last 30 years," says Malcolm C. Young, Executive Director of The Sentencing Project, a non-profit organization which promotes greater use of alternatives to prison and more effective methods of reducing crime.

Drug offenses account for nearly 60 percent of the federal prison population and more than 20 percent of the state inmate population. Despite harsh mandatory minimum laws that send many low-level drug offenders to prison, drug use as evidenced by survey information and emergency room admissions remains flat. The numbers contained in the Bureau's report demonstrate the role of policy over

actual crime trends in determining incarceration.

- State prison populations increased only 1 percent in the year ending June 30, 2002, following an ever-lower increase of 0.3 percent in the previous year. In this time period, nearly half the states adopted various strategies to reduce corrections costs by lowering the number of people imprisoned. The largest reported declines in prison populations occurred in states such as Texas and California, which changed parole policies to allow the release of thousands of inmates.
- In comparison, jail inmate populations grew by 5.4 percent, outstripping the annual average increase of 4.3 percent since 1995. Jails are locally controlled and less subject to state-wide policy changes.
- And, the federal prison population grew 2.8 percent, a little less than the average growth of 3.8 percent since 1995, and due in part to an influx of inmates from the closed prison system for the District of Columbia. Federal policymakers, who are far removed from the budgetary constraints that affect their state counterparts, have shown little interest in reducing the federal inmate population.
- Violent crime, which is of most concern to people on the street, has fallen to its lowest levels since 1974, when data was first collected nationally. This reduction in numbers of offenders has yet to show itself in rates of incarceration. Experts believe that policy decisions which have increased the length of sentences for both violent and non-violent offenders has more than compensated for the smaller number of offenders.

Among the two million inmates are nearly 10,000 youths who are incarcerated in adult jails and prisons, marking the influence of laws that make prosecution of children in adult court far easier than at any time in the nation's history.

----For more information: The Bureau of Justice Statistics BOJS

A FRIEND ON DEATH ROW

During Holy Week I was preaching near San Francisco and so had a chance to see Gary Hines. I knew him during the years I volunteered at San Quentin prison. Gary has been on death row for 19 years and has a final appeal pending in California's Court of Appeals. It doesn't look good for him; any day now he may get an execution date. I asked him when he last had a visit and he said, "When you were here last Easter." I once posted his name in this space, and he got a pile of

mail. He was thrilled. He said it helped him because it was the week he also found out one of his appeals had been turned down, bringing him one step closer to execution. I know he would appreciate hearing from you. If you are so inclined, here is his name and address:

Gary Hines #91000

San Quentin Prison

Tamal, California 94964

-----Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

READER'S RESPONSE

I enjoy your scriptural interpretations but the comments about "unilateral" military action in Iraq is inaccurate, as you know. Over 40 nations sanctioned an invasion. I guess if Nazi Germany had not attacked us directly, we shouldn't have fought them either. By the way, I think the money we will spend in Iraq will be appreciated and that we can afford it.

Maybe a true peace will be won by this action if you consider now North Korea (which is typical of tyrants who only respect force, not idle word that continue even after diplomacy has failed) is even singing a different tune. They have not launched a nuke at us yet either, so I guess we need to wait before that merits addressing the problem.

This all takes prayerful consideration. The problem is, even during prayer, we must fight wars (yes, all wars are not bad) because sometimes they are the only alternative.

Thanks for your good work-
Allan Shropshire

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Thank you. -

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