

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” EASTER SUNDAY APRIL 20, 2003

Acts 10: 34a, 37-43

Colossians 3: 1-4

John 20: 1-9

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Have you ever seen that ancient map that shows Europe and the Atlantic ocean? At a certain point, way out in the Atlantic, beyond their exploration and experience, the early map maker drew a dragon. There is an inscription at this unknown place in the distant ocean that reads, “There be dragons here.” Does that map mean they really believed dragons existed and that, if you went out too far into the ocean, you would meet one? Was this one of the “facts” they lived by---along with the notion that the world was flat and that sickness was caused by evil humors in the body? What about the other “facts,” like the ones the early settlers in Salem had, that made them sure some women were witches in league with the devil? Such outmoded ideas! --- we moderns say. But these were facts for some very smart people, they were sure of them and acted on these “facts”.

What about the resurrection? Are we caught here by some ancient “fact” of a primitive people? What evidence is there and is it enough to satisfy our modern criteria for facts? Why should we trust the word of people whose other beliefs we have discarded as hopelessly outdated or naive? In addition, these people who passed on these narratives we are proclaiming in our churches these Easter days, were not even the great thinkers of their day. They hadn’t, for example, built the pyramids that we marvel at even now. For the most part, they were the losers in their society.

The resurrection stories we are hearing seem confused; it is hard to figure out what really happened. Today’s story has Mary of Magdala alone, but what about Mark’s account we heard last night that told about another Mary, the mother of James and Salome also going to the tomb? Were there two angels, or just the “young man” from last night’s account, at the empty tomb? Just what happened; what did they see and more importantly, should we base our lives on their testimony? “Give us the facts,” we moderns ask. Actually, they weren’t interested in getting all the details right. They wanted us to believe what they believed. They wanted us to deal with the darkness they faced, and we still face. We do have that in common with them—our humanity and the darkness.

We notice that when we hear these stories there is no record of any appearances of

the risen Jesus to nonbelievers. Jesus appears only to individual disciples and groups of disciples. These scriptures were written for people who already believe. We don't have stories of other people running into Jesus by chance; there are no neutral observers or "unbiased witnesses." Only Jesus' disciples get to tell the story. And they are speaking to us---not nonbelievers. These stories are meant to bolster our faith and help us look for and see Jesus as he reveals himself today. What we have come to believe is that the same Jesus who revealed himself to the first disciples also reveals himself to us to strengthen our faith so we can live by the resurrection.

Today's story begins early in the morning, "while it was still dark." There is a hint of a new day coming; but not quite yet, for it is still dark. For Mary it is still dark, all she knows is that her beloved Jesus is dead and now his body is gone. Many of us experience the death of a loved one in a similar way. We go to visit a grave, pay respects to the dead, remember and grieve their loss. It is still dark: as it also is for those struggling with fractured marriages, ill health, disappointments and failure. There are no signs of new life, just grave sites that we visit and where we grieve. What Mary finds is an empty tomb. Her interpretation of the "facts" is, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they put him."

Then Peter and "the other disciple" run to the tomb. Peter trails behind. What slows him up, I wonder? Has John provided this touch to suggest Peter's memory may hold him back? Does Peter remember his betrayal and is he stuck in the past? Memory may hold us back as well, our discipleship may not be stellar, and we may feel less important or needed as a disciple. Perhaps our loyalties have been elsewhere or, at best, divided. If the resurrection is true, Jesus alive, then total loyalties may be required of us. Faith in Jesus' resurrection may cause us to question all other powers, all institutions, country and even church, when they fall short of the justice, love and compassion Jesus teaches. Why is there racism? Why inequality in the work place? Why are not all treated equally in church structures? Why must we opt for war? Why do we kill people who kill people as a way of saying killing is wrong?

If Peter gets to the tomb and comes to believe then he will have to view the world through the lens Jesus' Spirit gives; there will be no other way of looking and judging. As we look into the empty tomb, will we believe? Will we accept the forgiveness of our past disloyalties and compromises, as Peter did? And then,

whom must we forgive and set free with new life? Will we live and proclaim the Easter faith by forgiving enemies, feeding the hungry, encouraging those with weak or beginner's faith? Will sharing in this Eucharist today, God's generous gift of new life, stir up in us a desire to be generous to others? The empty tomb raises a lot of questions for us. We may be slow in getting there, slow to believe with a faith that changes us.

Another person arrives at the tomb with Peter. In today's account he is called "the other disciple," elsewhere John describes him as "the beloved disciple." Without a name, this disciple could be male or female— a figure representing all Christians. We too are the ones Jesus loves. This disciple has a special place in John's gospel. Here he interprets the empty tomb for us and is portrayed as the first to believe in the resurrection. Love appears to be the necessary key to interpreting the empty tomb. We disciples have a personal experience of being loved by God through Jesus' life, death and resurrection. This love helps us to look into the dark and see what others miss. With the "other disciple," love has trained us to see clearly. We see ourselves as forgiven and embraced by God's love. We look to others with the same seeing and believing eyes and reflect the forgiveness and love that has been so generously poured out on us. Love is the proof we have for the resurrection; difficult to prove with scientific fact perhaps, but no less real and concrete for those who have experienced it.

Each of us goes to the empty tomb today to peer into the tomb and into our own darkness. As we look, confident of the love we have received, we ask, "In the light of what I see in faith here, what new life am I now experiencing and with whom can I share it?"

## 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:.....

- Rex D. Penland #0318113 (On death row since 2/3/94)
- Frank J. Chambers #0071799 (3/10/94)
- William L. Barnes #0020590 (3/10/94)
- Jeffrey Kandies #0221506 (4/20/94)

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

## QUOTABLE

### “The Only Animal”

The only animal that commits suicide  
went for a walk in the park,  
basked on a hard bench  
in the first star,  
traveled to the edge of space  
in an armchair  
while company quietly  
talked, and abruptly  
returned,  
the room empty

The only animal that cries,  
that takes off its clothes  
and reports to the mirror, the one  
and only animal  
that brushes its own teeth—

somewhere

the only animal that smokes a cigarette,  
that lies down and flies backward in time,  
that rises and walks to a book  
and looks up a word  
heard the telephone ringing  
in the darkness downstairs and decided  
to answer no more.

And I understand,  
too well: how many times  
have I made the decision to dwell  
from now on  
in the hour of my death  
(the space I took up here  
scarlessly closing like water)  
and said I'm never coming back,  
and yet

this morning  
I stood once again  
in this world,  
the garden  
ark and vacant  
tomb of what  
I can't imagine,  
between twin eternities,  
some sort of wings,  
more or less equidistantly  
exiled from both,  
hovering in the dreaming called  
being awake, where  
You gave me  
in secret one thing  
to perceive, the  
tall blue starry  
strangeness of being  
here at all.

You gave us each in secret one thing to perceive.

Furless now, upright, My banished  
and experimental  
child

You said, though your own heart condemn you

I do not condemn you.

-----Franz Wright ("The New Yorker", March 31, 2003, page75.

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our webpage addresses: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

Jude Siciliano, OP

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