

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” EASTER SUNDAY

Acts 10: 34a, 37-43 Psalm 118 Colossians 3: 1-4 (or I Cor 5: 6-8) John 20: 1-9

By: Jude

Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

These Easter readings have similar beginnings. For example, today’s gospel starts, “...on the first day of the week....” St. Luke begins his story of the disciples to Emmaus, “That very day, the first day of the week....” Next Sunday we will hear again these words from John as he tells the story of Jesus’ appearance to the huddled disciples behind the locked doors, “On the evening of that first day of the week....” Usually, the gospels are not that fussy about precise days and hours. Most stories begin more generically, “After that Jesus went to Jerusalem....” or, “Early in the morning Jesus entered the Temple.” Given such generalities, we moderns want to ask: exactly when did Jesus go to Jerusalem...what day, year and hour?” But instead, we are almost always frustrated when we ask for that kind of information. It is as if the gospel writer is saying, “That’s not the point here.”

Despite the fact that the details of these Easter readings get confusing (were there two angels at the tomb, or just a young man.... did Mary Magdalene go alone or with two other women, etc.?), it seems that, concerning the day of the week of the resurrection, the writers are specific about one thing---it was “the first day of the week.” Not just the day after the sabbath, not just Sunday, but “the first day of the week.” The evangelists haven’t changing their usual habit of ambiguity about specifics. They just want to make the point that something new has happened, there is a fresh start, a new beginning for us all, it is “the first day of the week.” Just as God, on the first day, created light to pierce the darkness, so now God’s light has once again pierced the darkness —this time it is the darkness of the tomb. Because of “the first day of the week,” we no longer need to fear death.

There is much to learn on this first day and the three disciples in today’s story are our teachers. Mary goes to the tomb in the same way we have visited grave sites: to grieve; to pay respects to someone gone; to call to mind a relationship ended abruptly by death. She hasn’t anticipated the resurrection; thus, John tells us she went “while it was still dark.” It is dark because she does not yet see by the light of faith and so does not understand what has happened. An empty tomb is not enough

to convince her that Jesus is risen. Instead, she draws the same logical conclusion we would, “The Lord has been taken from the tomb!” That is the first bit of news she has to announce.

We look around the world trying to find logical arguments and hints of resurrection. We point to caterpillars that become butterflies with the gift of beauty and flight. We northeasterners point to frozen earth, bleak and brown and then to green shoots that soon will become daffodils. Somehow we think these are arguments for the resurrection, signs that life comes from unexpected, even dead-looking places. But with so much evidence of death these days; with more slaughter from car bombs in Iraq; death by starvation for millions, unending murder, rape and pillage of innocents in numerous countries (cf. below for information about world slavery) and with our own more immediate losses from the death of loved ones--- caterpillars becoming butterflies do not offer enough comfort and assurance in our grief. As a relative told me recently when her husband died, “He was my whole life.” More is needed to get through that kind of grief. The seeming “logic” of life--- to death-- to new life, leaves big question marks and not deep solace when death stares us in the face. We need more to keep us from faltering and, thankfully, we have more. Later in the story, though not in today’s reading, Mary will meet the risen Lord and come to believe what we believe—the dark shadow of death has been driven out by the light of the risen Lord. Once given the gift of light, she will proclaim the good news to the frightened apostles waiting in the upper room, “I have seen the Lord” (20: 11-18).

I wonder what slowed Peter up as he and “the other disciple” raced to the tomb? Is Peter’s slow pace John’s poetic touch suggesting that Peter’s memory of betrayal had slowed him down? Is he burdened by the weight of the past? If Peter comes to faith in the resurrection, everything will change for him. In the face of the risen Lord, Peter will have to accept forgiveness. It will be a gift, not something he earned, but something he must offer others—if he is to believe in the risen Lord. Hadn’t he heard Jesus say that he must forgive “seventy times seven times?” As we look into the empty tomb with the disciples today and express faith in the risen Christ, can we accept the forgiveness he offers us? And if we do, whom must we then forgive? Perhaps we don’t have any “heavy” sins to slow us down as we approach the empty tomb with the disciples. But when we reflect on the quality of our discipleship; the love we have for Christ; our dedication to his message and our response in service to our neighbor—perhaps we too might be slow in approaching the tomb. But if we remain slowed down by the past with Peter, we won’t “see”

the resurrected one. This “first day of the week” will just be another Sunday.

If Peter believes in the resurrection, he will have to view the world through the lens of Jesus; there can be no other lens, no other standard of behavior. He will have to give total loyalty to the Christ and turn away from all other contrary powers. We who have resurrection faith will also have to question and work to change all powers and institutions to which we give allegiance, if they do not manifest the love and justice Jesus has taught. Why, for example, in the richest country in the world, do almost 25% of our children live in poverty? Why aren't women given equality in our church, the church of the One whose resurrection was first announced to and proclaimed by a woman? How does the resurrection faith we have received challenge and empower us to speak and act, now that it is “the first day of the week?”

But if this is “the first day,” then John is reminding us that something entirely new and unexpected is happening and we have reason to hope. There is one more person in our “first day story.” John tells us it is “the one Jesus loved.” Some think it was John himself. The gospel may be intentionally ambiguous here so that each of us can put ourselves in the story. The beloved disciple looked into the tomb and “saw and believed.” The love this disciple had known had opened his eyes. Our faith tells us that we can call ourselves “the disciple Jesus loved.” The experienced of that love may open our eyes to the possibilities of this first day of the week ----as the beloved disciples' eyes were opened when he peered into the tomb. Love gave him sight. This love is not based on merit, or achievements or our brilliant insights. Rather, as it is with love, it is given as a gift. We, the beloved, now can confront death in its many guises.

Love invites us to take a close look at what is before us on this first day of new life. We don't look back over our shoulder at who we were and what we did in the past. This is a new day with new realizations and possibilities, after all, we are the beloved disciples. The love we have received is a basis for a new way to live. We can begin---or start again--- to act like loved ones. Because of Jesus' death and resurrection, we trust we will not fall out of the embrace of God's love and so we can take chances in loving others we might not ordinarily take.

We return from the empty tomb asking ourselves how we can live the life of a beloved disciple. How can we love better? Especially, how can we show love to those who don't have the signs our culture loves---like youth, looks, wealth and

power? Each of us makes the trip to the empty tomb today, peers into the tomb and into our lives. Is there someone we have not forgiven? Have we hesitated getting involved in serving others? What signs of death do we see that we must turn away from or confront? In the light of what we “see” on this first day of the week, what new life do we experience and with whom should we share it in word and act?

[Ever have the feeling your thoughts are coming from something you read or heard in another preaching? That’s the feeling I have about some of the above. Did I preach this before? Did I get these ideas from somewhere else? If I did, I can’t remember the source. Sorry. If someone recognizes them, let me know and I will give full credit.]

JUSTICE NOTES

SLAVERY IN THE USA TODAY?

[Recently I preached in the Monterey (California) diocese and noticed an insert in the parish bulletin which explained that the diocese has initiated a diocesan-wide anti-trafficking campaign. It may be the only diocese in the country to do so. Here is some information gathered from San Agustin’s parish bulletin informing parishioners about the realities of slavery today.]

Globally 27 million people are enslaved. That number is equivalent to the entire population of our neighbor, Canada.

- Slaves may have made the bricks that were used to build the factory that assembled the TV you watch.
- slaves in Latin America may have made the charcoal used to temper the steel that made the springs in your car and the blades in your lawnmower.
- Child slaves may have picked the coffee beans that were roasted to supply your morning cup of coffee.
- A young girl may have been sold into a brothel in Asia to be resold every night, earning \$10,000 for her owner, but only misery, abuse and illness for herself.
- a 7-year-old Pakistani boy may have been one who spent 10-14 hours per day chained to a rug-weaving loom to help make the carpet in your home.

Today the US government estimates that 50,000 people are trafficked annually into the US through deception, fraud and coercion.

These people are promised good-paying jobs but are then held against their will or are forced to work for little or no pay.

“The trade in human persons constitutes a shocking offense against human dignity and a grave violation of fundamental human rights.”

-----Pope John Paul II

Here is something we can do right now: Buy products (e.g. coffee) labeled, “Fair Trade Certified.” This is a guarantee that the workers are slave free and have been paid a living wage.

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

“Can you imagine what it’s like to have your boy on death row? Can you imagine what it’s like to visit him there every Saturday and tell him, ‘I love you. I’ll see you next week,’ when you never know if they’re going to call and say, ‘He’s up next—it’s time for his execution.’”

----Jeanetter Johnson, Mother of Alan Gell, who was retried and found innocent because prosecutors withheld evidence that might have cleared him of first-degree murder.

[The News and Observer, February 15, 2004, Raleigh, NC]

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:.....

- Terry L. Robinson #0349091 (On death row since 4/10/00)
- Eric D. Queen #0544664 (4/11/00)
- Francisco E. Tirado #0684814 (4/11/00)

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

READER'S RESPONSE

(Deacon Leo Bistak writes in response to our Passion Sunday reflections)

“Set like flint.” When I think of flint I think of it in interaction with steel. When steel or iron strikes flint, the flint flakes off tiny particles of iron. The force of the blow and the friction it creates actually ignites the iron, and it burns or oxidizes rapidly to form Fe₃O₄. Iron is converted to an iron oxide. The sparks that you see are the hot specks of iron burning! And when they strike dry wood or paper, the wood or paper can be united.

If we meet Jesus or the suffering servant head on this week, then something in us must change, must undergo conversion in the encounter. The change in us must spark new life, new fire because we have met Him and His truth.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

Jude Siciliano, OP

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