

FIRST IMPRESSIONS EASTER VIGIL -C- April 7-8, 2007

Gen. 1: 1-2:2 Gen. 22: 1-8 Ex.14:15- 15:1 Is. 54: 5-14 Is. 55: 1-11 Bar 3; 9-15,
32 -4:4 Ez. 36: 16-17a, 18-28 Rom 6:3-11 Luke 24: 1-12

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The gospel story at this Easter Vigil is a strange choice, when we consider that we are celebrating the resurrection. It's not a resurrection account at all! It is a story of loss; confusion; words from "two men in dazzling garments"; an announcement to the eleven disciples by the women of what they heard; disbelief by the eleven and Peter's amazement at the empty tomb.

In our parishes we spend a lot of time and energy getting ready for the Easter Vigil. In the parishes where I have been preaching this Lent the liturgical teams and musicians have been well into their Vigil plannings and practices. If you asked what they were planning, they would tell you they are getting ready for a joyful celebration of the Lord's resurrection. As well they should. I am sure the results of their careful work will bear fruit in the enthusiastic and prayerful response of the congregation.

Nevertheless, the gospel story could have been a bit more "demonstrative," "conclusive" and "cooperative," to fit the rest of the celebration. Don't you think? Perhaps not, because the women, the eleven and then Peter, call our attention to what we have this evening as we join them and stare into an empty tomb. We have the advice from the two messengers the women meet at the tomb, "Remember what he said." They are referring to Jesus' prediction of his passion and his resurrection. Jesus has joined us in our own dyings; he has gone all the way to the tomb with us.

But the two men in dazzling garments also wanted the women and the others to remember still more. They needed to remember and put trust in Jesus' promise that he and they would rise. Resurrection would follow all that pain... all that death. After all those early disciples saw of Jesus' horrible pain and death, it was hard to "remember" the promise of the resurrection. It's the same with us. After all the pain and empty tombs we have stared into, it is also hard for us to "remember" the resurrection.

During Holy Week a few years ago I was awakened by a late night phone call from a friend of mine. About 25 years ago I had been with her when her 52 year old husband was taken off life support in the hospital. She raised her three children on her own. Now she was calling to tell me that her 48 year old son had dropped dead in his home while talking with his wife. I rushed over to see her and her family and I sat with her as she wept and said, "This is too much for me. I could bear my husband's death, but this is too much for me!" She was composing a psalm of lament, a complaint and moan to God. Like many in situations of great grief, she felt her faith was being tested. She was fingering a cross made of palm that one of her children had given her a few days earlier on Palm Sunday. What words could anyone say to her? So we held hands, she fingered the cross and we stared down at the floor in front of us; trying to call on faith; trying to trust that God would fulfill the promise and raise her son up along with Christ. We were, as the two men at the tomb said, trying to "remember." I felt we were looking down into a dark tomb with no relief in sight. I am sure it was the way the disciples must have felt after Jesus' horrible death and burial. What could be said? What could be done? We felt defeated by a powerful enemy.

It was a very dark place. And who hasn't had similar dark places and suffered enormous loss? Even the more "timely" death of the elderly leaves us with uneasy questions and wonderings as we look into the tomb. We have known other tombs as well: the collapse of a marriage; betrayal by intimates; a failure of a life's project; unfulfilled dreams, a life-limiting illness, etc. We have looked into the darkness of many tombs and wept, wondered and wished we could turn the clock back to a better time.

The women who went to the tomb went to finish the customary embalming rituals. It was their final farewell; a natural and respectful thing to do for someone they loved. What else could they do? Mary Magdalene was among them. The accounts agree that Jesus had changed her life. She wasn't the prostitute history has labeled her, but she had known troubles and Jesus had turned her life around. When she and the women saw the empty tomb, Luke tells us, they "were still at a loss for what to think." But Luke is a poet and he also tells us that it is daybreak on the first day. Something is about to happen to these disciples. Someone is about to change their lives. But not right away. Like us, they will have to wait and waiting in such terrible moments is very difficult indeed.

Empty tombs prove nothing; it's just an empty tomb. Peer into it with Mary and her companions and with the widow I described whose son dropped dead. Bring to that empty tomb all the loss we have had in our own lives. We don't see the risen Christ. We don't see the dead enjoying themselves in the next life with all the others we knew and loved in this life. The empty tomb didn't prove anything to Mary and the women. But it did mean something and what it means only faith can tell us. The men at the tomb didn't use it as a proof that Jesus had risen. But they did say, "Remember what he said to you...." Jesus means something to us; he has changed our lives and, at moments when we stand by our personal or world's tombs, we "remember" Jesus.

We "remember" that faith in Christ risen from the dead can help us overcome our personal demons; can keep us working at what will make the kingdom of heaven more a reality in our lives and will keep us from becoming discouraged at the slow pace of the change we work so hard to bring about for ourselves and others. We remember his words when the bad news is really bad and we face the tomb of despair and defeat: "Come to me all who labor and are heavy burdened and I will give you rest." "This is my body broken for you." "Blessed are the poor of spirit, the kingdom of heaven is theirs." With the women we look into the empty tomb and we heed the good advice the two in dazzling clothing gave them. We remember the words Jesus spoke. The Word and this Eucharist are our daily bread, our food for the journey. Both sustain us while, as we say at this liturgy, "we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our savior Jesus Christ."

PRAYERS FOR PREACHERS

(I recently asked readers to submit prayers for preachers. Here is one. If you have one, send it to Judeop@Juno.com. I am sure other preachers will appreciate it.)

Lord, keep me from the habit of thinking I must say something on every subject and on every occasion.

Release me from craving to straighten out everybody's affairs.

Keep my mind free from the recital of endless details—give me wings to get to the point.

I ask for grace enough to listen to the tales of others' pains. Help me to endure them with patience. But seal my lips on my own aches and pains—they are increasing and my love of rehearsing them is becoming sweeter as the years go by. Teach me the glorious lesson that occasionally it is possible that I may be

mistaken.

Keep me reasonably sweet; I do not want to be a saint—some of them are hard to live with—but a sour old person is one of the crowning works of the devil.

Give me the ability to see good things in unexpected places and talents in unexpected people. And give me, Lord, the grace to tell them so.

Make me thoughtful, but not moody; helpful, but not bossy. With my vast store of wisdom, it seems a pity not to use it all—but Thou knowest, Lord, that I want a few friends in the end.

----prayer submitted by, Tom Miller, Lead Pastor, Morning Star Lutheran (ELCA), Omaha, NE

ANNOUNCEMENT----- “JUST FAITH MINISTRIES”

[At several parishes where I have preached these past months I met people who were part of a training program in the Church’s social justice teachings. The small group meetings include study, discussion and prayer based on the scriptures and the Church’s justice documents. Jack Jezreel sent this description of their program.]

JustFaith Ministries creates and supports faith formation processes and resources that emphasize the Gospel message of peace and justice, Catholic social teaching and the intersection of spirituality and action. The aim of JustFaith Ministries is to enable people of faith to develop a passion for justice, to express this passion in concrete acts of social ministry, and to organize and expand the work of social ministry in their faith communities. JustFaith, the thirty-week flagship program, has been used in over 700 parishes across the country. Other programs include a social ministry skills-building program and a process for youth. See www.justfaith.org.

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Examples of a lack of pulpit honesty, then, include a familiar list of transgressions: claiming someone else’s experience as your own; revealing confidential matters from your present or past arenas of ministry; demeaning or stereotyping others in any illustrations, including those in the first person. It is no accident that many of the issues related to honesty in preaching have to do with abuses of first-person references. Perhaps this should tell us something about their power, as well as caution us to use them only with homiletic care and moral integrity.

-----Richard L. Eslinger in, *Pitfalls in Preaching*, page 100

JUSTICE NOTES **EASTER VIGIL EXULTET**

What a powerful prayer this is for us now in this time in our history. Despite the many unjust events and structures in our world, we are indeed an Easter people, washed in the waters of Baptism, anointed with the oil of salvation, fed at the table of the Lord. We are called to believe in a God who brings life from our many forms of death and to trust that our God is a God free to work his wonders in endings as well as in beginnings. “The Resurrection can only be received and affirmed and celebrated as the new action of God, who creates new futures for people and lets them be amazed even in despair. The Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus express in new ways God’s freedom, justice and power to bring life even in the face of death.” (*Prophetic Imagination* by Walter Brueggemann)

Every moment we live in justice and peace with one another, we experience the Reign of God. To understand Easter is to live this reality day by day, moment by moment. The tomb is empty and we are called to seek Jesus among the poor and the powerless and to bring the good news of salvation and the joy of His kingdom to a world steeped in darkness. We are called to share the life of the Risen Christ with those who are entombed in poverty, violence, indifference and satisfaction.

The Easter tomb is indeed empty but the Lord is alive and working in our world. He is visibly present in the community of Sacred Heart Cathedral. We witness Him as one Who lives among us in large and small ways. He is present in our ministries of simple fellowship to one another and in the multitude of ways we each reach out to give new life and hope to those in need of our care and service. We know that the Lord is alive here among us most of all because the words the Acts of the Apostles used to describe the first Christians are true of this community in ever new and wonder-filled ways: (Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. Two new CDs Available:

“First Impressions Preaching Reflections: Liturgical Year C.” Begins in Advent and contains **three** reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of the year. It also has book reviews and additional essays related to preaching.

“Liturgical Years A, B and C.” Reflections on the three-year cycle, with

Year C updated.

If you are a preacher, lead a Lectionary-based scripture group, or are a member of a liturgical team, these CDs will be helpful in your preparation process. Individual worshipers report they also use these reflections as they prepare for Sunday liturgy.

You can order the CDs by going to our webpage: www.preacherexchange.com and clicking on the “First Impressions” CD link on the left.

2. **“Homilias Dominicales”** —These Spanish reflections on the Sunday and daily scriptures are written by Dominican sisters and friars. If you or a friend would like to receive these reflections drop a note to fr. John Boll, O.P. at Jboll@opsouth.org Or jboll@preacherexchange.org

3. Our webpage: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>
Where you will find “Preachers’ Exchange,” which includes “First Impressions” and “Homilias Dominicales,” as well as articles, book reviews, daily homilies and other material pertinent to preaching.

4. “First Impressions” is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Dominican Friars of Raleigh, N.C. If you would like “First Impressions” sent weekly to a friend, send a note to fr. John Boll, OP at the above email address.

DONATIONS

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below.

Make checks payable to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation: <http://preacherexchange.com/donations.htm>

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