

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” EASTER VIGIL -C-

Luke 24: 1-12

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Isn't this gospel passage a strange choice for such a momentous evening? Here we are at the Easter Vigil. We have blessed the new fire, lighted the Paschal candle and passed the new light among us, one to another. We processed into the darkened church led by the Paschal candle, our symbol of our desire to follow the risen Lord, our light in darkness. Then we read the magnificent scriptures about God's mighty acts of Creation and the Exodus from Egypt. We heard the powerful prophets tell us of God's ancient, undying love for us and then Paul's reminder to the Romans and us of the new life we have been given in Christ. Wonder of wonders(!), Paul tells us, death no longer had power over Christ—nor over us, for in Christ we live. One would have expected a grand finale scripture reading, the equivalent of verbal fireworks and timpani. For heaven's sake, tell us about the moment of the resurrection! Tell it big, persuade us with oratory, mesmerize us with poetic thunder. Don't leave us with this flat sounding story of a few women, an empty tomb and two strangers (at least THEIR clothing was dazzling!) who speak comforting words. That's all we get!? On this, our big night and new day!

In addition, tonight's story ends shrouded in mystery; Peter is “amazed at what happened.” What happened?! We have no proof positive here, just an empty tomb, and those burial cloths left behind. Why would any thief steal the body and leave behind these cloths? Is that what “amazed” Peter?

In some ways I am glad for this story and the way it was told. The details give strong hints that the story isn't a set-up by the disciples. The first events aren't about a well choreographed “discovery” of the risen Lord. Rather, the disciples show doubt and incredulity. The women were there for burial purposes, not to fabricate a resurrection story. It's obvious they weren't expecting a missing body and an empty tomb. The apostles don't believe the women's report. Peter returns from the tomb curious, but not disposed to spread any news report of a resurrection.

The two men at the tomb tell the women, “Why do you seek the living among the

dead?” They are looking in the wrong place for Jesus: he’s not in the past where they last saw him —dead. He’s not in any dead place. He isn’t causing people’s pain, to test their faith. He isn’t in our defeat and destruction as some vengeful god who takes from suppliants at whim. He isn’t fighting wars, taking one side against another, helping wreak havoc and destruction. Don’t paint his image on any war banners. He isn’t bestowing loyal devotees with still more money and “blessings” of luxury items, while oblivious of the desperate. He has left the table in disgust of those who have bloated themselves on too much food while wasting enough to feed the nearby hungry. No, he is not in any of these dead places. The women are told to look for Jesus among the living; and that’s where we should look as well. Then where shall we look for him?

We take a clue from the two men in dazzling garments: look for him where there is life coming from death. The gospel stories we have heard tell us that Jesus certainly has gone among the dead—but to raise them up. He has given sight to the blind, speech to the mute and hearing to the deaf. He sat at table with sinners and gave them forgiveness and new life. Where he has walked there is life, not death and decay. We will find him: wherever stones have been rolled back and barriers torn down; where those who thought life had ended for them, and are given hope. Jesus is with his living witnesses feeding the hungry, raising up the despondent, nursing the injured, being the voice of the voiceless. He is living within us when we turn from what is destructive in our lives, headed for a dead end, and when we gather strength to begin anew. The two men at the empty tomb have spoken the truth: he is not found among the dead, but among the living.

Note who the real Actor is in this story. The women went to the tomb to do the best they could. Since Jesus was dead, it was fitting for them to tend his dead body with the spices they brought. But when they got to the tomb all the really important work had been done for them—and for us. They had nothing to do with the events of this day. Neither did Peter, the latecomer to the scene. God raised Jesus from the dead. We celebrate Easter because of what God did and because this gives us hope that God can still bring life where we have encountered dead ends and futility. Logic fails us on this day. Logic tells us that a tomb and a dead body are the absolute end. Faith places a different light on the scene.

In the dark of this night we celebrate Jesus’ resurrection. It is appropriate, I think, to hear a resurrection story that has darkness about it—the story leaves us room to

make up our minds, not on what evidence, or lack of it, the women find; but on the faith we have received through baptism. The world's darkness and our weariness with what seems to be the too-frequent victory of sin and darkness over good, leave us staring into the dark confronted by a question: As we look into the dark of the empty tomb and into the darkness of our world, are you and I going to be able to say, "Yes, I see the darkness, but...." After the "but" comes our proclamation of faith.... We make the leap into darkness, trusting that Jesus has been raised up and that we too will be raised. The waters poured over us at baptism have given us "night vision"—we can see by God's light in the darkness. We peer into the dark and see. We are careful not to get tripped in the dark by putting our confidence on what has no lasting light for us and will only disappoint.

Yes it is dark, but thanks to the resurrection, we can see quite clearly: we can see how much God loves us. When it is really dark we say, I can't see my hand in front of my face. But, in the light of this night, we can see far beyond our private space--- we see the needs of our sisters and brothers and the path we must follow through the darkness. After all, we have night vision.

The two men didn't present a convincing argument to the women, as if to prove the fact of the resurrection. Instead, their "proof" was to remind them to trust in Jesus' words to them, "...that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners and be crucified and rise on the third day." That's what we modern believers are given by the empty tomb; the living memory of Jesus' words. We are invited to faith as we hear them proclaimed from the scriptures, "He is not here, but he has been raised." The women heed the men's message, they stop their search in the graveyard and go to tell the eleven and the others. They, like us, are invited to believe God's revelation to us this night, "He is risen."

The resurrection stories we will hear over these Easter days will vary in a swirl of details. The numbers of witnesses and exact sequence of events are hard to figure out; but all the accounts agree on the essential "facts"—God has done an extraordinary thing in raising Jesus and has put a "stamp of approval" on all Jesus' teachings and actions. Because of the resurrection we can trust what we have heard from Jesus—our sins are forgiven and we have entered a new and eternal life. Because of the resurrection we can also set about living Jesus' life. Jesus announced that with his coming the reign of God has drawn near. Empowered by his Spirit, we work in the surrounding darkness to manifest that reign by healing

the sick, forgiving those who have offended us, raising up those burdened and setting free those who are oppressed. Either the world is left with an empty tomb, or Jesus' disciples make his presence known through how we gather as his community of sisters and brothers to break the bread and share the cup----and how we proclaim his gospel to the world through our words and the example of his love.

QUOTABLE

“Holy Week teaches that while nothing is impossible with God, we must wait for the realization of that possibility. This is difficult in an age that so values activity over passivity or contemplation. We moderns are happiest when we have something to do. We plan and plot, scheme and devise, work and produce. Through technological sophistication, we contrive to control the uncontrollable—future and destiny, success and defeat, history and mystery. We have come a long way in the modern effort to master chance. Palm Sunday counters this; it slows us down.

The man who comes seated on the colt is a sign of contradiction. He is a threat to the God whom we have made over in our image, a God of high achievement and performance, majesty and power, triumph and transcendence. God in Jesus of Nazareth unnerves and disturbs us. His crucifixion and death disclose the chosen vulnerability of God, the willingness of God to come among us, to share our ordinary lot, to suffer with us, to suffer for us.

...Holy Week prepares us to live in hope, in active, creative waiting. Holy Week teaches us to hope in future possibility, even in the face of negation. Indeed, when we hope in the absolute future, we grasp what was required of Jesus: that he stake his whole life on its being directed towards God, that he trust his life had a definite meaning in God, that he believe that God would save him and deliver him absolutely. This is hope that binds back to the heart of God all creation which has been scattered by sin. This is hope that heals and restores, that waits and creates. ...This week is holy for what it teaches us: to wait, to value being, presence and silence; to love without reserve; to live in compassionate and practical solidarity with women and men and children who suffer afflictions concretely, unbeautifully, actually; to hope.

Out of this waiting, in the midst of this love, within our solidarity comes resurrection.

---M. Shawn Copeland in, “The Living Pulpit”, January-March, 1998,

JUSTICE NOTES

When considering economic, social and environmental policies on behalf of agriculture and rural communities, The National Catholic Rural Life Conference considers the following as one of its principles:

Solidarity

The virtue of solidarity propels individuals and communities to go beyond their narrow selfishness or enclave mentality, and to care for their neighbors, their regions, even the world. Solidarity moves us beyond blind self-interest and private advantage; solidarity reminds us that we are social beings. In solidarity, we are joined in a greater body of being and the fruitful sharing of common desires.

For rural life, the principle of solidarity motivates us to care for the earth and the greater bio-community in which we ourselves are just a part. Solidarity in this sense means a stewardship of the land as we recognize that creation is a web of life in which we all cling together. What does not fall into the web of life? What is not a part of creation? We confess that all things are a part of creation, and solidarity extends this to say that all people and all living things are part of one community, the community of Christ - the new creation we seek in our modern lives.

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 because prosecutors withheld evidence that might have cleared him of first-degree murder. He was found innocent.

[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:.....

Ernest P. Mc Carver #0264009 (On death row since 9/23/92)

Carl Moseley #0294214 (10/1/92)

John L. Conaway #0084604 (10/19/92)

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

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: "FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR C" This compilation, from past "First Impressions," includes two reflections on almost all Sundays and major feasts for this liturgical year. For more information and to purchase go to: <http://judeop.ispraleigh.com/>

2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use "First Impressions" in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)

3. Our webpage address: <http://judeop.ispraleigh.com/>
(Where you will find "Preachers' Exchange," which includes "First Impressions" and "Homilias Dominicales," as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)

4. "Homilias Dominicales"-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Leobardo Almazan, Juan Torres, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like "First Impressions," "Homilias Dominicales" are a preacher's early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive "Homilias Dominicales" drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: Jboll@opsouth.org or jboll@preacherexchange.org

5. "First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John

Boll 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 to:

Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation:
<http://judeop.ispraleigh.com>

Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA

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