

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 2<sup>ND</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER    APRIL 22, 2001  
Acts 5: 12-16    Revelation 1: 9-11a, 12-13, 17-19    John 20: 19-31

Dear Preachers:

Over the years, since the '60's, some in the U.S. have used the middle eastern greeting of “peace”. “Peace” we say upon greeting or departing. And at our liturgies we are accustomed to the greeting of peace just before we receive the Eucharist. “Peace to you”, the congregants say to one another. In biblical accounts this greeting is significant, especially in today’s gospel scene in which it echoes Jesus’ reassurance of peace spoken to his disciples in his Last Discourse (John 14: 27-28). That night Jesus reassured the fearful disciples around the table that he would return to them. In today’s scene he fulfills that promise and backs it. He gives them the Holy Spirit in whom they will have Jesus’ abiding presence. As he promised at the supper, Jesus will not leave us orphans. We won’t just have a record of tales of his presence with us 2,000 years ago. Instead, he is a present reality through the Spirit and so he is a never fading foundation for our peace.

When Jesus appears to the disciples in the locked room he breathes upon them, evoking the memory of God’s creative breath that gave life to the first human in Genesis. Throughout John Jesus runs into trouble with the religious authorities for curing on the sabbath. For example, after the sabbath cure of the cripple by the Sheep Pool (5:ff.) Jesus is challenged by the authorities for the cure. He retorts, “My Father is at work until now, and I am at work as well.” Through sin we have besmirched the divine image in which we have been created. Nevertheless, God has not taken a sabbath rest from us, but continues to breathe the divine life back into us. So, after his disciples’ betrayal, Jesus returns from death to breathe new life into them. Now with the Creator’s own Spirit in us we are empowered to become faithful children of God. Now sin will rule over us no longer, for our spirit is united to God’s Spirit. Now Jesus’ own power over sin and death is working within us.

On the cross the power of sin seemed invincible. It had overcome One who had shown himself to be powerful over evil. The resurrection shows that Jesus is more powerful than all the powers of sin and death. His Spirit is indestructible, and those in whom he has breathed his Spirit already have eternal life breathing in them. All is not well with the world. But evil will not destroy life after all, for the

Spirit of Jesus could not and will not be extinguished. It now breathes within each believer.

Walter Wink has reminded us that we can not lay at the feet of Adam and Eve all the sin now existing in the world. There does seem to exist great spirits of evil at work in the world: the powers of political corruption, racism, sexism, suppression of whole populations, materialism, raw ambition, greed, etc. Such powers did their worse to Jesus on the cross but were not enough to triumph over him. He rose again and he unites himself to us through his Spirit so that we too can overcome the powers of evil when they confront us in daily life. In chapter 16, Jesus promised to send the Paraclete to his disciples. This would be necessary, he says, because he is going away to the Father. This Paraclete (“parakletos” in Greek means, “one called or sent to help another”) will help the disciples against the powers of evil and will plead our cause before God. It will also be a Teacher who is a friend for those who want to learn. Through this Teacher, we will learn our value and how to avoid being overwhelmed by ignorance or any feelings of inadequacy and discouragement in our discipleship. The Paraclete is also the Spirit of Truth, helping us to see beyond our myopic self absorption. Through the Spirit, we will be able to know what is true and good and how to live according to it; and to discern what is false and evil and how to shun it.

In his Last Discourse, Jesus showed his concern for those he called out of the world and whom he had kept firm by his Word. He prayed that they would continue to be true to his Word. This Word singled them out for their mission and would bring them a succession of believers. He prayed for those of us who would believe based on their witness and, like those disciples, would continue Jesus’ presence in the world. When Jesus breathes his Spirit on the disciples he empowers them to continue his work of forgiveness. They, and then we through their witness, will be marked by the way we bring God’s forgiveness to others. Our own Spirit-empowered mission is to show God’s love for the world by being, as Jesus was, God’s agents of reconciliation.

It is the “first day of the week”, the day of the resurrection. In John’s gospel, at the moment of today’s narrative, Jesus has already gone to the Father. His resurrection and his exaltation are but a single event. (Unlike Luke, who has an extended period after the resurrection before Jesus’ ascension and return to God.) Jesus has already appeared to Mary. Mary had stayed behind after getting Peter

and “the other disciple” to go to the empty tomb. Then she returns with the news of Jesus’ resurrection to the disciples who are together behind locked doors for “fear of the Jews”. She is the only disciple in this gospel to receive an individual appearance by the risen Lord and the only one to be individually commissioned by Jesus. Quite a contrast here: the first to see the risen Lord is the one moved by love, despite the risks of being out and about in a cemetery by herself during a tense time. But even the fearful disciples get a visit from Jesus who (as he has done before in this gospel for the blind and lame) goes out looking for them.

When the risen Jesus comes into their midst, the disciples are given a whole new moment in their lives. He does not rebuke them for their betrayal, nor for the fear that scattered them and sent them into their hiding place. The appearance brings them joy, the past is over, all is forgiven, a new life has begun. Their joy isn’t just an ecstatic celebration, lots of cheer and good feelings. Rather, this appearance and the joy it brings, is the launching pad for their new ministry of reconciliation.

In traveling from parish to parish this Lent, I met candidates in the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (R.C.I.A.) I was struck by their enthusiasm and joyful anticipation of Easter and their upcoming baptisms. I was also impressed by the fact that their teachers and sponsors during the preparatory stages were themselves formerly in the very same program. They too had gone through recent conversions and that joyful experience fired their enthusiastic participation in the program. They wanted to pass it on, to share what they had received. It is no wonder that the very same scene in today’s Gospel that has the disciples so joyful also has their commissioning to go to others with the news of forgiveness. And the first they tell is Thomas, on of their own, still in need of reconciliation.

Thomas is the figure who personifies apostolic doubt. There is no sign of doubt when Jesus first appears to the other disciples. Their immediate response is rejoicing. Seems a bit incredulous to a skeptical reader. Didn’t anyone have even a smidgen of doubt? After all, the death was so clear, so final. Thomas is unique in the gospels, only John has this story. (When one gospel writer has a feature not found in the others, it is worth some attention.) Thomas is the spokesperson among the disciples for doubt. That makes his profession of faith so remarkable--- and it is a very developed statement at that. It is as if Thomas is helping later Christians, John’s own community and us, deal with our doubts. We are encouraged through Thomas’ profession to allow this once skeptic to voice our

own faith in Jesus; he is “Lord and God” for us too. We are the disciples Neal Flanagan (COLLEGEVILLE BIBLE COMMENTARY) calls the disciples of “the 9<sup>th</sup>. Beatitude”----“Blessed are they who have not seen and have believed.” (20:29)

#### ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:

Edward Schillebeeckx, FOR THE SAKE OF THE GOSPEL. New York: Crossroad, 1990.

These are homilies preached by the great Dominican theologian. They reveal how faith, theology and preaching are of a whole in his life. Twenty homilies are from his Sunday preaching and another fifteen are taken from special occasion preaching. These make great meditative reading.

#### QUOTABLE:

Will there ever be a time when people are so full of the Holy Spirit that they are capable of living in freedom for one another, that the least become the most precious, that love is a light burden and community a reality that exceeds all dreams? That they are full of the Holy Spirit and forgive one another's sins and rudenesses?....even now people must arise among us and band together to hold the vision high and hand it on. Believing in the Holy Spirit means that we are still infected by the same words: to bring good news to the poor, or cry liberation to the captives and to make the oppressed walk in freedom. Over the centuries and through these centuries there has been a kind of constantly which is constantly repeated and puts itself forward and which unites us with countless people before us.

----Edward Schillebeeckx, OP in FOR THE SAKE OF THE GOSPEL, “THE JOHANNINE EASTER: THE FEAST OF THE GIVING OF THE SPIRIT”, Page 71.

#### READER'S RESPONSE

This note is from Jeff Bray, one of our readers.

Your remarks on Jesus' Entrance into Jerusalem were deeply moving to me. On Saturday (3/31), myself and 7 other men engaged in a sweat lodge ritual. Rather than just sittin' around sweating and belching, we partook of this rite with deep intention and respect. Like Jesus entering Jerusalem, we entered the bamboo and blanket homemade lodge from the East, facing West, with the intention of allowing parts of ourselves to die. Our sweat lasted over 3 hours, with four rounds of red hot rocks placed into the lodge to pour water on for steam and heat. As a

group of men, we asked ourselves questions about our lives, Where am I in my life? What am I thankful for? What in my life needs to die? Where do I go from here? After the final rocks cooled, we exited the lodge (the tomb/womb?), shriveled, (mostly) naked, and wet bathed (baptized) by a torrential downpour of an evening thunderstorm.

It was a powerful experience, especially to share it with a group of men. The questions you ask in your "First Impressions" on Passion Sunday, so reminded me of this experience I felt compelled to share this with you.

### **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](mailto:Jboll@opsouth.org) or [jboll@preacherexchange.org](mailto: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

P.O. Box 12927, Raleigh, N.C. 27605, (919) 833-1893, Email: [judeop@juno.com](mailto:judeop@juno.com)