

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 2nd SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 5: 12-16 Psalm 118 Revelation 1: 9-11a, 12-13, 17-19 John 20: 19-31

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

My first response to today's gospel is, "Thank God for Thomas." We are a long way removed from this event. As a modern person reading different resurrection accounts, I note variations in the details. I tend to want more accuracy in the stories so that I can show them to others and say, "Here, this is what really happened, all the witnesses agree." That kind of coalescence of details would satisfy my need for neatness and my penchant for order. I would feel reassured. But would some newspaper report of the events two thousand years ago build my faith, help me believe when in crisis, keep me going over the long haul of discipleship? I wonder.

What we have instead, are stories filled with chaos and confusion. Everyone seems caught off guard by the resurrection. It was a surprise to them as they struggled to deal with something that was completely beyond their experience. So, Thomas' skepticism sounds real to me. I would have responded similarly, because I respond that way these days. My doubts and struggles don't go away, but are there despite my faith. I like it that someone I can identify with was on the scene, attempting to throw the cold water of "reality" on what must have been an ecstatic group of disciples. Since I wasn't there, I want someone to speak my case. Thomas, who missed the first appearance in the upper room, stands in for us who are long removed from these events. His need for help in believing speaks our own needs as we survey a world that acts so contrary to resurrection and new life.

In addition, my own church appears to lack the vibrant faith of a resurrection-based community of believers. If we believe in the resurrection, why aren't we a more alive community at Sunday worship? Why aren't we, in a time of multiple military engagements, more outspoken witnesses for the shalom-peace Jesus wishes for his friends in the upper room? Our society needs a strong community's voice to speak critically to a world of prejudice, fear, hatred, exploitation and oppression. Recent clergy scandals chip away at my resurrection faith as well. I stand with Thomas, hearing about resurrection, but sometimes feeling very removed from any vibrant manifestation of its reality. I am glad Thomas spoke

up. I am glad he wrestled, as I do, with doubts. I am even happier that the risen Christ took all this into consideration and made that extra appearance—a return trip to the upper room—just to help a disciple work through his doubts and arrive at faith.

I suspect the early church, rather than denigrate Thomas as the weak link in the chain of faith, saw this story as a treasure. From the beginning there were naysayers who denied the resurrection and held the central belief of the church up to ridicule. For them the first community could point to Thomas, who also was a naysayer and attest, here is one who also doubted and then came to believe. Jesus' passing through the locked doors of that room suggests he wasn't and isn't restricted by any place and time. So for us gathered at worship, we invite that same Christ to come to us, see our doubts and struggles and reassure our faith, we who haven't seen, but try to believe.

The risen Christ greets his frightened followers with a greeting of peace—"Shalom." This was more than a "hello," more than a "calm down, get a grip." Remember earlier in this gospel Jesus promised his peace, "Peace I leave with you...." Today he bids his peace to them twice. They will take his peace into the world, empowered by the Spirit he breathes on them. We are reminded, as Jesus breathes on his disciples, of God's breathing into the humans God formed from clay in Genesis. We are being created anew, with the life and breath of the Risen One. Now his followers will be able to live and preach his message of peace. God's shalom was the promise made through the prophets. God would create a new community of believers who would practice forgiveness and harmonious relations, they too would be bearers of shalom, as Jesus was.

We are not merely looking back on one historical moment. Rather, whenever Christians practice forgiveness, overcome death in its daily guises—hatred, deceit, indifference, contention, violence, prejudice, etc —then the Spirit of Christ is alive and well in believers and the resurrection is expressed again in this moment and this time. We can't "prove" the resurrection to non-believers, not even with this story of doubting Thomas. But we certainly can be fingers pointing to it whenever we are signs that the life of Christ has not been extinguished, but is enfleshed in his modern followers.

Most of us gathered for worship this Sunday probably don't share the disciples'

fear. They feared for their lives; they had seen what had happened to Jesus. As his followers, they could expect similar treatment, so they locked themselves in to keep danger out. While we probably don't have their limiting fears, we may have their initial doubts. They had heard Mary Magdalene's report of the empty tomb (Easter Sunday's gospel) and her meeting with the risen Christ (20:10-16). But her report was not enough to overcome their doubts. This may be the way Jesus' message about not being afraid applies to us—he could be telling us not to be afraid because of our doubts. Don't let our doubts paralyze us; instead of drawing on them, we must lean more on the faith we do have. In addition, we don't stand alone in these doubts, we belong to a community whose members also struggle with their doubts. Our community worshiping around us today doesn't consist of some doubters and other believers; it is comprised of believers who wrestle with doubts. Thomas with his doubts, surrendered to belief before the risen Lord. In fact, even seeing the risen Christ wasn't initially enough for Thomas to have full faith.

Faith, it seems from today's story, has to go beyond seeing and touching with our physical senses. Instead, like Thomas, the risen Christ encourages a leap of faith, "...do not be unbelieving, but believe." Thomas is a reminder today that our journey of faith includes doubt.

We are fortunate to be among those Jesus called "blessed." We have trusted the gospel news of the resurrection, have embraced it as our faith and have gone about living as people who draw life from a Spirit that had been breathed into each one of us.

If the resurrection has been told in any other way, we would have felt distant from it. Struggling with our incompleteness, the darkness of faith and the hurts we have experienced and observed in others, the last thing we need is a resurrected savior who comes to disciples all spanking clean and spruced up! This would have made him too removed from our lives. Instead, while he is resurrected, he still shows signs of his dwelling among us—his wounds. It was through his wounds, not in spite of them, that he was identifiable to those left behind. It was through these same wounds that we received our life. Our wounds do not set us apart from Jesus, indeed, they are signs of our union with him. And his wounds assure us we shall not be defeated by all that assails us. When Jesus enters the locked room where his frightened disciples are holed up in fear, he doesn't come in a blaze of glory,

surrounded by angelic powers and blinding light. He comes with his wounds---the wounded savior comes to his wounded disciples. Like us, his sojourn has dealt him heavy blows, he too has been battered. Since we all have wounds, Jesus shared even that with us. He wasn't a casual visitor who just passed through our lives, an observer not fully involved.

Whenever we experience them in our lives, our wounds don't have to defeat us. They link us to one another and to the risen Christ. His resurrection helps us bear these wounds and gives us hope that we are being healed of them. But even before complete healing happens, we know that in our own woundedness, we meet Christ, who comes through any barriers we may set up to cover our hurts. He would be with us where we are most protective and locked up---and there bring us his peace.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Hessel, Dieter T., ed. SOCIAL THEMES OF THE CHRISTIAN YEAR: A COMMENTARY ON THE LECTIONARY. Philadelphia: The Geneva Press, 1983.

This book looks at the Lectionary, the seasons and assigned readings from the perspective of social analysis. Its essays, by a variety of writers, offer the perspective of the poor and marginalized in interpreting the readings and seasons

QUOTABLE

First Reading of the Text

This first reading is a spontaneous, even "naive" engagement with the text. All faculties of mind and heart are open, with no concern for what one ought to think, much less what one will say later in the sermon. This is the time to listen, think, feel, imagine and ask. All responses should be jotted down; do not trust the memory or take time to weigh the merits of your thought. This process is most enjoyable, but one should not be deceived by the pleasure; serious preparation has begun. And by all means, no other books or study aids are to be used at this point; they will have their chance later. Second only to the fault of not doing adequate study is that of introducing into one's preparation too soon the secondary resources. When used at the proper time they are indispensable, but if too early opened, they take over. They suppress and intimidate the preacher. After all, who is going to venture a thought or an interpretation when at the very same desk are internationally known Bible scholars? They intrude themselves between the

text and the preach and begin explaining everything. Some preachers who spend much time in study have confessed to having preached texts which they had not even read in the process of preparation.

-----Fred Craddock in PREACHING, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985, pages 105-6.

JUSTICE NOTES

In the words of our Holy Father, we need a "moral about face."The whole world must summon the moral courage and technical means to say "no" to nuclear conflict; "no" to weapons of mass destruction; "no" to an arms race which robs the poor and the vulnerable; and "no" to the moral danger of a nuclear age which places before humankind indefensible choices of constant terror or surrender. Peacemaking is not an optional commitment. It is a requirement of our faith. We are called to be peacemakers, not by some movement of the moment, but by our Lord Jesus. The content and context of our peacemaking is set, not by some political agenda or ideological program, but by the teaching of his Church.

-----God's Promise and Our Response, #133, U.S. Bishops, 1983

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:.....

Johnnie Spruill #0385535 (On death row since 11/4/92)

Perrie Simpson #0371096 (2/1/93)
General Miller #0281791 (2/1/93)
-----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, 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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