

First Impressions 2nd SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 2: 42-47 Psalm 118 1 Peter 1: 3-9 John 20: 19-31

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

How can we explain the dramatic change that took place among Jesus' followers? We very recently heard how they abandoned him as his end drew near. Yet, in our first reading from Acts, it is hard to recognize the former dismantled disciples with the description of the early church—even if it is a somewhat romanticized and nostalgic narrative. What made the difference, of course, was the Resurrection. Everything changed---one could say, reversed 180 degrees— because Jesus rose from the dead and, as we hear John tell us today, he appeared to his disciples and breathed on them the Holy Spirit.

They changed from being a dispersed and frightened band of disciples, to those, Acts describes as, devoting themselves to hearing the Word, sharing their goods with one another, breaking bread in their homes and, as we will see later in Acts, feeding the hungry, curing the sick and proclaiming the gospel to the world.

One thing is clear from today's gospel. The profound change that took place, both in the individual believers and the community itself, didn't start with instructions from a textbook of lessons learned in a classroom. That would come later. What came first for those earliest Christians and what still comes first for us, is our faith built on our relationship with the Risen Christ. The resurrection stories remind us that Christ returned to give us his abiding, guiding and strengthening Spirit—and that has made all the difference.

What John wrote down, he says at the end of our scripture today, he wrote to help us come to faith in Christ. Today's resurrection appearance is one of the stories he tells us to help us come to a deeper faith in the Risen Lord. It begins with "Shalom," the traditional Jewish and mideastern greeting. It means "Peace." The greeting hasn't been limited just to a particular part of the world. In recent years it has not been uncommon in our culture to hear people greeting people with, "Shalom." It was a very common greeting in the 60's among the young and war protestors. During anti-war demonstrations people would also raise the peace sign. These days the sign is revived at peace gatherings around the world and "Shalom" is once again a greeting with meaning.

We wish one another peace, sometimes with deep feeling and earnestness—other times casually. At today's liturgy we will offer one another peace before receiving the Eucharist—peace for our neighbors, our church and our world. Since we will need help to live out that peace, with family, neighbor and within our very selves, we come forward hungry and thirsty to receive Christ.

We need help in our internal and external work of peace from the One who, when he rose from the dead and returned to his disciples, greeted them with "Peace to you." It might sound like the traditional and customary greeting. But it wasn't just our version of "Good day," "Good morning," or "How are you?"—greetings that fall into the general category of "polite etiquette." When Jesus speaks his first word to the huddled disciples the greeting has profound meaning.

What would you have said, in Jesus' place, to a group of followers who said they would follow you to their death? And didn't. Hadn't Thomas said to the others, when Jesus announced his plans to go and awaken Lazarus from death, "Let us go too and die with him" (11:16)? Wouldn't we, in Jesus' place, have greeted the group with, "Well a fine group of loyal disciples you turned out to be! Where were you when I needed you? What a disappointment you all are!" I would have said that before I sighed, shrugged my shoulders and finally said, "Peace to you."

But this is a gospel account and there is good news in it for the disciples and for us. Whatever fear, conflict, disbelief, disappointment and guilt the disciples may have felt over their dismal performance, Jesus was able to pass through the bolted doors and speak a word that does what it says. He says, "Peace be with you" and in the midst of their shattered lives and dissipated hopes, he gives peace. It is the same way the Creator brought forth light over "the formless void" and the "darkness over the deep," —through the Word and the hovering Spirit (Gen. 1: 1-2).

It is what Peter praises God for today in our second reading, for giving us "a new birth to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...." Jesus is risen from the dead and the first thing he does is to speak words of peace and reconciliation. He has wiped out our sins and more than filled in where we are lacking by breathing his Spirit into us. We were who we were, but now we are who we are—children of God, breathing by means of the new life we have through the Spirit.

Jesus speaks again, "Peace be with you." Why a second utterance of the same

greeting? Because now he is preparing them for what he wants them to do. He has unlocked our doors and commissions us to go into the world forgiving and reconciling people—as he has done for us. God has anointed us disciples with the empowering and cleansing Holy Spirit, so that we can be peacemakers in a frightened, conflicted and sinful world. For this we need the “Shalom” that only Jesus can give.

John is soon to end his gospel. Luke had the Acts as a follow-up to his gospel in which he tells of the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost. John doesn’t have a sequel and so he has one more thing to do: to assure us that Jesus’ Spirit is now breathed upon us. At the end of today’s homily, I would be tempted to invite the congregation to take some silence and breathe in a long, slow breath and pray, as we inhale, “Come Holy Spirit.” We certainly need the Spirit and the breath of new life, if we are to do what Jesus commissions his disciples to do. “Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them and whose sins you retain are retained.”

I am writing this at a retreat center. There is a group here focusing on forgiveness. Some have suffered abuse, deceit or a lack of love since childhood. They want to get on with their lives; but forgiveness comes hard to them. Their bloodshot eyes are signs that some are having a ferocious struggle; the wounds run deep. Others on the retreat are carrying much guilt and can’t let go of it. They need reassurance that their past is behind them and their sins are forgiven. Some will receive assurance by means of the Sacrament of Reconciliation; others will experience it through reassuring words of those who are counseling them. Through the ministry of this community Jesus’ “Shalom” will be spoken over people yearning to hear and experience it.

What keeps us bound up in our sins; what or who “retain” sins? I don’t think that Jesus is sending out his disciples to forgive some and judge not to forgive others, as much as he is instructing us, his church, to offer forgiveness too others. Christ assures us that our proclamation of forgiveness is a gift God offers to all. But some people may refuse the offer and remain bound by their past. The gift is always there and it is our commission to keep offering it.

We must not become discouraged when our “Shalom” is not received and maybe even rebuffed. Peter reminds us that we “may have to suffer through various trials.” What will eventually come through to others, we hope is, what Peter calls, “the genuineness” of our faith, that we witness to and share the “Shalom” Jesus has

spoken over us and the world.

JUSTICE NOTES

EASTER VIGIL EXULTET

**The power of the holy night dispels all evil,
Washes guilt away,
Restores lost innocence,
Brings mourners joy,
It casts out hatred,
Brings us peace,
And humbles earthly pride.**

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 He spoke are true of this community in ever new and wonder-filled ways:

“See how they love one another.”

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

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." *If the inmate responds, you might consider becoming pen pals.*

Please write to:.....

Tony M. Sidden	#0368820	(On death row since 3/15/95)
Charles P. Bond	#0036850	(3/24/95)
Thomas M. Larry	#0233526	(4/28/95)

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

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. Two new CDs Available: “FIRST IMPRESSIONS PREACHING REFLECTIONS”

“Liturgical year A,” which begins in Advent and contains **three** reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts for 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. 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" CDs link on the left.

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: <http://www.preacherexchange.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, Jose David Padilla, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina McCarthy, 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://www.preacherexchange.com>

Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

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