

Second Sunday of Easter - C Cycle

April 3, 2016

INTRODUCTION (*Acts 5, 12-16; Rev. 1, 9-11a.12-13.17-19; John 20, 19-31*)

Something new and wonderful has revealed itself in our world through the resurrection of Jesus. It is a divine power at work in Jesus' appearance to the disciples on Easter Sunday night. In that appearance he gave them peace, the gift of the Holy Spirit and the power to forgive sins. It is through these gifts he shares his eternal life with those who follow him.

Our first reading shows how the Spirit moved in the apostles with divine power, causing the Church to grow rapidly from the beginning. Our second reading, from the Book of Revelation, describes an appearance of Jesus that occurred many years later. It occurred at a time when the Church was suffering under serious persecution. God assured his people he would not leave them. "Do not be afraid," he told them. He begins to reveal what the future holds for God's people, difficult times, but victory when it's all over.

HOMILY The publication: Homiletic and Pastoral Review, in three sentences, gives a perfect summary of today's readings. I would like to quote it. "Jesus' miracles – especially that of the Resurrection – profoundly and permanently transform reality. After his resurrection, Jesus commissioned the transformed apostles to go and preach the Good News to the ends of the earth. This same risen Lord seeks to transform us as well, first during our earthly pilgrimage by means of the sacraments; then, when that pilgrimage ends, by means of our own rising from the dead."

Today we hear about Thomas. I want to show you a painting by Caravaggio that I was very much impressed with. Let me say first of all, that the gospels do not tell us whether Thomas touched Jesus at all. What we see here is the interpretation of the artist who shows us the hand of Jesus on Thomas' arm, guiding Thomas' hand to the wound in the side of Jesus. Whether or not Thomas touched Jesus is not what is important. What is important is that Thomas came to great faith in Jesus and his exclamation: "my Lord and my God" is the most profound statement of faith in Jesus that we read in the Scriptures.

I think we can safely say that Thomas is not the only person who refused to believe in Jesus' resurrection. In the resurrection appearances Jesus appeared first to the women who followed him. They told the disciples who treated their message as a lot of nonsense. Then Jesus appeared to two disciples who told the others, who refused to believe them. In Matthew 28, 17 we read that when Jesus later appeared to his apostles in Galilee that "they worshiped him, but they doubted (or some doubted)." The gospels tell us Jesus even reprimanded some of the disciples for not believing those who had seen the risen Jesus. (Mark, 16,14 and Lk. 24,25) . Caravaggio has two disciples in his painting who are watching intently, with a somewhat perplexed look on their faces. Thomas is often referred to as doubting Thomas, but he wasn't alone. We can really be grateful to Thomas and people like him, because they show us how hard it was to come to faith in the resurrection of Jesus. It wasn't something everyone was hoping for and everyone instantly believed because a couple of people claimed to have seen Jesus. It took a lot of convincing, a lot of appearing, a lot of teaching on the part of Jesus to lead his followers to faith in the resurrection – and then it cost most of them their lives when they refused to stop proclaiming Christ has risen. By the way, the Greek word for witness is *martyr*.

The apostles had to see the risen Lord if they were to be witnesses of Jesus' resurrection – because that is what a witness does – a witness testifies to what they have seen. The element of faith however goes further than what anyone can perceive with their senses. And that's what

happened with Thomas. He saw the risen Jesus, but he believed that Jesus whose body had risen was infinitely more than a human person but that Jesus was the Lord and God of all creation.

All that Jesus said during his public ministry comes together in Thomas' expression of faith: all the people he healed and raised from the dead, all the people whose sins he forgave, the walking on water and calming the sea, the multiplication of the loaves and all those self identifying metaphors he spoke: "I am the light of the world," "I am the bread of life," "I am the resurrection and the life," "I am the good shepherd," "I am the vine, you are the branches," "before Abraham came to be, I am." If you feel left out because you have never seen Jesus as Thomas did, Jesus speaks a word of praise and blessing for all of us who believe without having had the privilege of seeing him: "blessed are those who have not seen and have believed."

Faith is key to our relationship with him. As we continue our Mass, we pray for a deeper faith in his presence with us and his love for us. And knowing that Jesus does not lie we pray for constant faith in his words "I am the bread of life."

Third Sunday of Easter - C Cycle **April 10, 2016**

INTRODUCTION: (*Acts 5,27-32.40b-41; Rev. 5,11-14; John 21,1-19*)

The risen Lord continues to be the focus of all of our Scripture readings today. I would like to comment on our second reading first, the Book of Revelation. John, the author of the book, had just attempted to describe his ecstatic vision of God in heaven. In the vision God had in his hand a scroll. The scroll is a central focus of the book of Revelations for the scroll revealed the events that were to occur in the future. However, the scroll was sealed with seven seals and only the risen Christ was capable of breaking open the seals so the scroll could be read. The risen Christ is described as a lamb that had been killed ... killed but who was victorious over sin and death and every form of evil. In this very short passage, every creature in heaven and earth is praising God the Father and the victorious Lamb of God, the risen Lord, who could open up the scroll. It is worth pointing out that the Lamb on the front of our altar is the symbol of the victorious and risen Christ from the Book of Revelation.

Today's first reading is taken from the Acts of the Apostles. The incident we are to hear about occurs shortly after the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus. The apostles Peter and John had healed a lame man in the name of Jesus and they were arrested and put on trial before the supreme Jewish religious body, the Sanhedrin. They had already received one warning to stop talking about Jesus. Freedom of speech was not part of their constitution. The trial is very interesting and has been summarized quite a bit. I think the most important part of the story is that at the end of the story, the Peter and John were punished by being beaten with whips and then as they left they were filled with joy because they had been made to suffer for the sake of Jesus.

HOMILY: We are told that this was the third time that Jesus appeared to his disciples after he rose from the dead. The greater focus however is not so much on his resurrection, as it is on what the future will be like after the resurrection. In other words, how will the community of disciples continue to experience Jesus' post-resurrection presence and carry his work forward. We can answer the question by comparing today's miracle to Jesus' first miracle in John's gospel where Jesus changed gallons and gallons of water into wine at the wedding feast of Cana. Both miracles provided an abundance of what it was the people needed.

Or with the same thought in mind of God's abundant blessings, compare today's miracle with the multiplication of the loaves and fishes (feeding 5000 with five loaves and two fish – with 12 baskets of food left over, because Jesus provided more food than the people could eat. Today's miracle is telling the future Church that God's goodness and blessings will not end now that Jesus has risen. But Jesus will always be with his Church, watching over it, helping it to grow. By the way, don't waste time trying to figure out why there were 153 fish in the net. Most scholars speculate it is a number that indicates abundance.

Notice also, Jesus not only provided the abundance of fish, but he had breakfast ready for the weary disciples. Jesus is aware of our smallest need, although, as a good parent he doesn't always give us what we want, because he does not want to raise a lot of spoiled children.

You might notice that love enters into the story. Notice it was the unnamed disciple, known as the disciple whom Jesus loved, who first recognized that the person who called to them from the beach was "the Lord." I believe the more we love Jesus, the more we will recognize him in wherever we go and in whatever we do.

The love that Jesus shows his little group of disciples provides a good backdrop for what happens next. Three times Jesus questions Peter (do you love me?) Three times Peter assures Jesus of his love, and three times Jesus gives Peter the job of caring for his Church. By the time this gospel was written, Peter had already followed Jesus by having been crucified. Although Peter was long dead, the position of Chief Shepherd which Jesus had given to Peter did not die with Peter – if the position of Chief Shepherd were to end with Peter's death, why did the gospel make so much of Jesus commissioning Peter for that ministry? Other shepherds would follow in Peter's footsteps.

Many people still die as martyrs in following Jesus. But most of us, like "the disciple whom Jesus loved," followed Jesus by witnessing to his faith and love for Jesus.

Just remember the risen Lord still watches over his people, blesses them, hears their prayers and invites us to follow him into eternal life. Amen.

Fourth Sunday of Easter - C Cycle **April 17, 2016**

INTRODUCTION (*Acts 13,14.43-52; Rev. 7,9.14b-17; John 10,27-30*)

In our first reading we join St. Paul on his first missionary journey. We are in Antioch in Pisidia, a small city in what is today the central part of Turkey. Paul's companion on this trip was Barnabas. Jewish communities were scattered all throughout the Roman Empire so Paul made a visit to the local Jewish synagogue there. He was invited to preach and his first visit was so successful that he was invited to come back the following week. When he returned almost the whole city was there to hear him. Many of the Jewish leaders opposed him and they got him thrown out of town.

The Book of Revelation requires a lot of explanation, which we do not have time for – but at least I want to give some background to today's second reading. Last week we heard John, the author of Revelation, describe some of what he saw in a vision of heaven. You might remember last week God had a scroll on which future events had been written. But no one could open the scroll except the Risen Jesus who appeared in the vision as the Lamb of God. That's where last week's reading ended. The Book of Revelation goes on to tell us that as the seals were opened, war and terror came about on the earth. The Book of Revelation does not delight in horror; it was simply encouraging God's people not to lose hope, especially those who suffer for being faithful to Christ.

This is where today's reading takes us. One of the elders standing before God's throne interprets another part of the vision of heaven. John sees God's holy people surrounding God's throne and praising him. They are dressed in white, symbolizing their inner holiness, and they are holding palm branches as a symbol of their sharing in Christ's victory over sin and death. Their sufferings are over, God will protect them, and the Lamb of God will shepherd them and provide for all their needs.

HOMILY Today's readings give us about a dozen topics we could talk about. Traditionally this Sunday is known as Good Shepherd, because the gospel always comes from John's gospel, chapter 10, where Jesus tells us in various ways that he is our Good Shepherd. But there are so many other important themes that come from our readings today, that I thought I would just comment on a few ideas from our readings today. My comments may be helpful for you, or you might find something else in today's readings that is useful. I'll start with the gospel. Our gospel takes us back to before time began, back to when there was only the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In this part of John's gospel, Jesus identifies himself as the Good Shepherd. In doing so, however, Jesus is identifying himself as God himself. The connection of the Good Shepherd with Jesus divinity can be found in the prophet Ezekiel. In chapter 34 of the prophet Ezekiel, God did not hold back in condemning the shepherds of Israel, i.e. the kings of Israel, for the sinful and incompetent way they governed God's people. The solution to this poor leadership God spoke through Ezekiel when he declared: "I myself will look after and tend my sheep." (Ezech. 34,11) In the image of the Good Shepherd we see the fulfillment of that prophecy. In case there is any doubt as to whether our Good Shepherd is divine, Jesus makes it clear in the last sentence of today's gospel when he says: "The Father and I are one." That statement was certainly clear to the Jewish leaders because they started picking up stones in order to put him to death for blasphemy (saying he was equal to God). Jesus did not back down on what he had said, but even more strongly he repeated what he wanted them to accept when he said: "If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father." With this authority backing him up, is it any surprise that Jesus expects his sheep to hear his voice and for them to follow him? Not only does he have the right to expect us to listen to him and follow him. He also has the power to give us eternal life.

And that brings us to our reading from the Book of Revelation which tells us of the great multitude that followed Jesus faithfully, how God will meet all their needs, they will hunger and thirst no more, God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; suffering is over and death shall be no more. Notice we are talking of a great multitude which no one can count. That certainly represents more than the number 144,000 which some religions claim are the total number of those who will be saved. This picture of heaven is God's reward for those who have faithfully followed Christ.

Our first reading shows us that following Christ faithfully is not always a piece of cake. Paul and Barnabas were struggling with times of success and times of failure, times of peace and times of turmoil, times when others accepted them and times when they were rejected. But they never quit, they just moved on. And God calls us to keep on struggling to follow him and serve him and when we fail, to get back up and not to give up.

This sums up my thoughts centered around Jesus as our shepherd, Jesus who always existed and who in the course of time took on our human nature to show us how to live the kind of life that will lead to eternal life with God.

Fifth Sunday of Easter - C Cycle

April 24, 2016

INTRODUCTION (*Acts 14, 21-27; Rev. 21, 1-5a; John 13, 31-33a,34-45*) - Last Sunday we heard an abridged account of St. Paul's first missionary journey. His preaching and miraculous works led many people, both Jews and Gentiles, to faith in Jesus as the Messiah. At the same time as Paul was converting people to faith in Jesus, there was a considerable amount of opposition to his teachings. In today's first reading, Paul is on his return trip to the Church in Syria, which had originally sent him on his journey. In spite of the harsh treatment he had previously received from his opponents in various towns and cities, he is not afraid to revisit those places. If you listen carefully, you might be confused by the name "Antioch," because so many cities were named Antioch. The first mention of Antioch in today's reading refers to a small town in Asia Minor (in today's geography the area would be in central Turkey). It was a mob of unbelievers ran Paul out of town. The second Antioch that is mentioned was in Syria and it was the third largest city in the Roman Empire. It was the church community in that city that sponsored Paul on his first missionary journey. Thus, Paul was returning there to report on the successes and challenges of his mission. On his way back home, he warned his converts that living the gospel is not always easy. He told them: "It is necessary for us to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of God."

HOMILY – The gospel of John is often seen as having two main parts: the first part is referred to as the Book of Signs, the second half as the Book of Glory. Today's gospel begins the second part, the Book of Glory. When Judas left the place where Jesus and the disciples were celebrating the Last Supper, Jesus said "Now has the Son of Man been glorified..." Jesus knew what Judas' plans were...what he was up to. Glory is described in various ways in the Scriptures, so to understand it a little better, it will help us if we go back for a moment to the Old Testament. The most primitive way of describing it is as the pillar of cloud or a pillar of fire that led the Hebrew people from Egypt to the Promised Land. It was something visible. Later at the time of Moses, it was described as a luminous cloud or a light so bright that it could not be seen because it was so brilliant it would blind a person. As centuries passed seeing the glory of God referred to witnessing God's saving acts. It is interesting how people who have had a near death experience, experienced God's glory in some of these ways.

In today's gospel we find ourselves at the Last Supper. Jesus' "hour" which Jesus spoke of so many times in John's gospel has finally arrived. Jesus refers to this "hour" as his "hour" of glory, which includes his death and resurrection and return to the Father. Sometimes we see in the gospels that the thought of his death preoccupied Jesus, and sometimes his thoughts were on the glory of the resurrection and his return to the Father. In his mind however, his "hour" encompassed all of these events, as we can see at the beginning of today's gospel: As Judas left the Last Supper room Jesus could say: "Now is the Son of Man been glorified and God is glorified in him." On a number of occasions Jesus clearly expressed how all these events come together as his time of glory. I will give only one more example of it. Jesus said on another occasion "Therefore does the Father love me: because I lay down my life, that I may take it up again...This commandment have I received from my Father." (Jn. 10, 17-18) It's hard to think of all the ways Jesus suffered as something glorious, but connecting the resurrection and his return to the Father with Jesus death does indeed spell "glory" for Jesus. It also reveals glory for God the Father and for our salvation. God the Father is glorified through the obedience of his Son, the ministry and love of his Son and the Sacrifice of his Son. We too are glorified through the sacrifice of the Son through the coming of the Spirit, the Spirit of love that comes from the Father and the Son, and through the Sacraments that connect us each week with our saving Lord.

Our gospel today is a beautiful interpretation of Jesus death and resurrection. The command of love he gives them, makes it possible for them, if they have his love in them, to have him continue to sustain them and be with them – even though he is no longer visible to them.

Jesus' death and resurrection throws light on our other two readings today. Paul tells his new converts among the Gentiles: "it is necessary for us to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of God." We all would like God to make life easy on us, but sometimes it's not so easy to follow his way or his teachings or to have the kind of love he expects us to have.

God knows how we think. He knows that we do not think of suffering as glorious and so he tells us in the Book of Revelation (today's second reading) there is glory at the end of the road for us if we follow him. The great glory that is to come is indescribable. God has promised us a new heavens and a new earth – one in which there will be no pain or sadness (he will wipe every tear from our eyes), he will be with us in our new city, the heavenly Jerusalem. God's glory will transform us and will fill us with God's own brightness and joy and life forever. Amen.

Sixth Sunday of Easter - C Cycle **April 30/May 1, 2016**

INTRODUCTION – (*Acts 15, 1-2.22-29; Revelation 21, 10-14.22-23; John 14, 23-29*)

After Jesus had ascended into heaven, Jesus' followers did not see themselves as part of a new religion. They continued to follow their Jewish laws, customs, rituals and traditions. However, when Gentiles started to believe in Jesus there were problems. Many Jews, especially those who lived around Jerusalem, accepted Jesus as their savior and messiah but they also insisted that Gentiles had to adopt Jewish laws and customs if they wanted to be a follower of Jesus. So when our first reading speaks of circumcision, it's really talking about all the rules and customs the Jews were bound to follow - dietary laws, feast days, etc. This conflict arose especially in Antioch, in Syria, because it had a large population made up of both Jews and Gentiles. To solve the problem as to what should be demanded of Gentile believers in Jesus, the leaders of the Church at Antioch, including Paul and Barnabas, went to Jerusalem to meet with some of the other Apostles. Paul insisted that we are saved by Jesus' death and resurrection and the Jewish traditions and laws, other than moral and ethical laws like the Ten Commandments, were no longer required for salvation. With support from St. Peter, Paul's views were accepted by the group. Their decision, which pretty much makes up today's first reading, was sent back to Antioch along with Barsabbas and Silas, from the Jerusalem community who would verify this decision. You can see what an important decision this was if you consider that it is very likely that Gentiles would have rejected Christianity if circumcision and other Jewish laws and traditions were required of them. For example, bacon, ham and pork chops would be forbidden as well as shrimp and clams and crabs. I'm sure there would not be two billion believers in Jesus in today's world; maybe a couple of hundred thousand. Most of us would probably still be worshipping Zeus, Pluto, Apollo, Dionysus and Aphrodite. Notice how the Apostles introduced their decision: "It is the decision of the Holy Spirit, and ours too..." That the Church is being guided by the Holy Spirit, has always been the belief of the Church whenever the bishops gather in council together with the Holy Father.

HOMILY – A holy rabbi spent a considerable amount of time every day praying at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. One day Sam, a curious neighbor who was in charge of a souvenir booth near the Wailing Wall approached the rabbi and asked him "Rabbi Aaron, what do you pray for every day?" The Rabbi answered, "I pray for world peace, I pray for a cure for cancer, I pray for clean air and water all over the world, I pray that all little children get to grow up healthy and happy." Sam asked, "Do you feel like your prayers are being answered?" The old Rabbi answered: "I feel like I'm talking to a wall."

Sometimes we all feel that way. I am convinced though that even when we pray and don't get what we ask for, the Lord will bless us in some way and that the way he blesses us will be better than the special favor we may have asked for. No prayer is ever wasted. Sometimes when I preach a homily I ask myself "did what I had to say, help anyone? Or was I talking to a wall?"

Anyway, let's try to understand today's gospel. It is short, but the ideas are many. Jesus is at the Last Supper and he is trying to prepare his faithful followers for everything that is about to happen. They are all feeling good after their Paschal Meal and a few glasses of wine, but before they are in bed that night, their whole world will have changed. Jesus has a lot he wants to say, and he has little time to say it.

Today's gospel begins with a teaching on love – the main ethical teaching of his ministry. The important idea he wants them to remember about love is that, contrary to our culture, love is not simply a matter of warm, fuzzy feelings. Love involves sacrifice, sacrificing our will to the will of Jesus, which is ultimately the will of God the Father. Sometimes it's easy to do and sometimes it's hard, but it will always bring us blessings. The first blessing it brings us is God's presence in our life. This is especially true when we receive Communion. Jesus tells us if we love him and keep his word, he and his Father will love us and will make their home within us.

Another blessing Jesus gives us if we love him, is the Holy Spirit who will teach us. The Spirit is not going to show up with a big book to teach us more questions and answers as from a text book. The Holy Spirit will help us understand what Jesus has taught us and will help us understand better the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection and its meaning in our lives. Also the Spirit will teach us how Jesus would have us live in a very complex world two thousand years after the time when Jesus lived. Society and life were much more simple when Jesus lived. Today life is more complicated and the Spirit will help us deal with its complexity. We heard how the Spirit guided the Church in our first reading as it struggled to understand how Gentiles were supposed to fit in with Jesus teachings. After the apostles concluded how to handle the situation they knew they had been helped by the Spirit and they introduced their decision with the words: "it is the decision of the Holy Spirit and of us..."

With this special presence of God in our hearts and with the light of the Holy Spirit, Jesus can guarantee his disciples and apostles peace. It is not a kind of worldly peace where people aren't fighting. It is an inner peace based on our love for God and for each other as Jesus told us we need to have.

During this resurrection season, we see how Jesus remained with his community, especially in the Eucharist on the first day of each week, how he guided them and blessed them, even as he was no longer with them visibly. We saw in the second reading where all this is going, a picture of the future that fills us with hope – even in the anxieties of world. The heavenly Jerusalem, permeated by God's glory will be our eternal protection and our joy. Amen.