

**INTRODUCTION:** The first reading comes from the time of the Babylonian exile which took place about 600 years before Christ. The prophet Ezekiel, who was in Babylon with the other Jewish exiles, had a vision of a field covered with dry bones. The field of dry bones represented God's people and their nation which was destroyed by the Babylonians. In his vision Ezekiel saw God join these bones together, cover them with flesh and breathe life into them. It was a prophetic vision that God would bring his exiled people back to their homes and to their land. Today's first reading concludes and interprets Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones. This reading emphasizes for us that God is the source of life and it prepares us for today's gospel which is about Jesus raising his friend Lazarus from the dead.

**HOMILY:** A woman once wrote to *Catholic Digest* to tell about her six year-old grandson. Their pastor had died. A retired priest was temporarily serving as a replacement. One day he announced that the bishop would soon be sending the church a new young priest directly from the seminary. When her grandson heard this announcement, he told his grandmother that when the new priest came he would no longer be going to Mass. "Why are you saying that?" grandmother wanted to know. The young boy answered, "when they get priests directly from the cemetery, I'm staying home." Of course the new priest was not coming from a cemetery but from the seminary.

Jesus and Lazarus are the only people I've ever heard of who, after having been buried, got up and on their own, walked out of a cemetery. Jesus claimed he was the resurrection and the life and he could prove it by raising Lazarus. Is there anyone in the history of the world who could make that claim? Medical science is capable of resuscitating people who have passed over into the next life. Many of those who have come back have spoken or written interesting stories about their experience. We do distinguish between resurrection and resuscitation. Resurrection is entering into a new and spiritual life which I believe will be happy and it will be eternal; resuscitation is a return to one's present life, and a resuscitated person will eventually die.

The raising of Lazarus, in itself was awesome, and for the family and friends of Lazarus it would have been wonderful, but this miraculous event gives us additional reason to marvel for it was a sign (important word, it was a sign) of greater things to come for all who love God. It is a sign that Jesus would not be held in the clutches of death after his cruel and painful execution. It is a sign to us who know someday we will have to leave this life, that there is life beyond the grave, and Jesus is the one who will bring us to this new life if we make it our choice to follow him.

When Jesus raised Lazarus, not everyone interpreted this sign in a positive way. Jesus' enemies gathered together and were saying (as we read in John's gospel): "what are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him." The high priest stated, "it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." (*Jn. 11,50*) John loves irony and

it is certainly ironic that Jesus should die because he brought a person back to life. But there is a greater irony still in that Jesus' death would bring about his glorious return to the Father.

His death would be the completion of his mission. As he said, "I came that they might have life and might have it to the full." (*Jn. 10,10*) His death and resurrection would bring about a movement that would be a source of life for the millions that read this sign for what it means to demonstrate for us.

When I think of all these things, I am not surprised that 25 years ago my visit to the tomb of Lazarus so moved me that I could hardly talk about it for five years afterwards. There was nothing fancy about the tomb, just an empty room with a single incandescent light hanging on a couple of wires. But it said so much to me. It said God is not dead. It said, and it continues to echo what Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life, whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" Standing in that empty tomb I felt God's presence in a very powerful and wonderful way. Amen.

### **Passion Sunday – A Cycle**

**April 9, 2017**

Mass always recalls that Jesus gave himself for us and that he gives himself to us. Today, especially, we recall in a dramatic way what it means that he gave himself for us and to us. As he entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey, people were praising him and calling on him to save them. (Hosanna means "save us" – an acknowledgement that Jesus was their messiah, the one who could set them free from Roman power.) He didn't look very much like he could save anyone after Pilate got finished with him – and what happened to all those who were praising him as their king just a few days before. Again we find ourselves asking why Jesus had to die. How could all that we've just heard happen? The powers of evil were against him from the beginning, and finally in crucifying him they seemed to have annihilated him and put an end to his preaching and his healing and his forgiving work. But the forces of evil could only glory in their victory for just a couple of days. It's necessary to visualize this story, to consider who Jesus was, the Lord and King of all creation, to consider how he was treated and to consider how we treat him. Reflecting on the passion has always lifted my spirits when I was troubled. May it bring you that same peace, a peace only Christ can give. Let us take a moment to quietly reflect on all we've heard. Amen.

### **Easter**

**April 16, 2017**

**Homily-** "Do you believe in life after death?" the boss asked one of his new employees. "Yes Sir," the new employee replied. The boss said: "Well, after you left early yesterday to go to your grandmother's funeral, she stopped in the office to see you". (*The Joyful Noiseletter, May-June, 2017, pg 1*)

Easter is a happy time for Christians. It tells us there is life after death. It tells us there is hope no matter how desperate life seems to get. For Jesus' followers it was a whole different story. Easter Sunday was a sad and dark day. Jesus' followers were expecting Jesus would gather the Jews together and stage a revolution against the all-powerful Rome. They expected the Jews would miraculously defeat the Romans and Jesus would reign over God's people and God's people would be free. All their hopes for a better world had been crushed when Jesus was arrested and crucified. When the sun rose on Easter Sunday there was nothing but mourning and sadness.

To add to their misery that Sunday, things continued to get worse. Some women came to the tomb early and found the tomb had been opened and the body of Jesus was nowhere to be found. Two of the Apostles checked out the situation and discovered it was indeed true that Jesus' broken and battered body was gone but the cloth he was buried in was still there. Wasn't a Roman guard posted there to prevent anyone from taking Jesus' body? For Jesus' followers it was a double loss – they lost him when he was put to death and now his body had been lost. The fact that people came to the Apostles with stories that they had seen Jesus didn't faze them. They knew Jesus was really dead. The soldier's spear that cut into his heart showed that. They didn't know what to do.

Indeed, the first Easter was not a happy one. At least not until Jesus appeared to all of his Apostles on Easter Sunday night. They couldn't believe what they were seeing. He was alive. It wasn't just his spirit; he came with his real body and he just appeared. He was not just alive, like some zombie in the movies, but his body was glorified. This means Jesus looked like he did when he was transfigured on Mt. Tabor. He showed them his hands and feet and side so they could be sure it was really Jesus. He had to eliminate any doubts about his resurrection because he was going to send them out to proclaim to the world that he had risen. His followers who didn't get to see him would have to believe the Apostles. It is something that's not hard to believe because preaching about Jesus cost most of the Apostles their lives. The Apostles didn't go out and make a lot of money preaching things they made up that were not true; instead they preached what they saw and they had nothing to gain for their efforts. That's where the word martyr comes from - it is a Greek word that means witness.

So if you have a happy Easter, consider why you are happy. We're not happy because Jesus' first followers were miserable. They would soon be happy. We're happy because Jesus overcame the power of death. We all know death will get us someday, but Jesus has promised to share his risen glory with all of those who follow him. For those who follow him, death is only a door that opens to a glorious new life. It is a promise of peace and eternal happiness. Jesus died so we could live, like him, forever. Amen.

## **Second Sunday of Easter – A Cycle**

**April 23, 2017**

**Introduction:** (*Acts 2,42-47; 1 Peter 1,3-9; John 20,19-31*) In our first reading today, St. Luke gives us a lovely picture of the early Church - how it was one big happy family where everyone was agreeable with one another and cared about each other. If we read a little further in the Acts of the Apostles, we see this idyllic condition didn't last

very long. Some members cheated on their socialistic system. Persecutions came and the community scattered. Yet the Church kept growing. This idyllic picture could not last as the community of believers continued to spread and to grow. In today's world there are 2.2 billion Christians and slightly more than half of them are Roman Catholics. The other half of those claiming to be Christian are divided up into 45,000 Christian denominations. With so many people, we can hardly expect perfect harmony, but what does hold us together are four basic elements that St. Luke identifies for us in today's first reading. They can be summarized by **book, brethren, bread and prayer**. Here are the four: (1) holding to the teachings of the apostles – that's the book, (2) to the communal life (trying to help one another to some degree – even if not totally sharing all our possessions), that's the brethren – we accept one another as brother and sister (3) celebrating the breaking of bread (their term for the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper) that's the bread and (4) prayer. These four elements of our Christian faith tell us that being a member of the Church is more than just a matter of having our name on some Church's roster. St. James' famous statement: "Faith without works is dead," is another way of saying that an inactive believer is not much of a believer at all. (*James 2, 17*)

**Homily:** This past week I went to the hospital to see my cardiologist and the entire parking garage seemed to be filled. I drove all the way to the top floor and I thought I better start praying that I can find a spot up there. I said to God, "come on God, do your thing." I hardly had the words out of my mouth than I saw a place open – it was the only place open. I certainly praised and thanked the Lord. The resurrection tells us Jesus is always with us. He doesn't always answer us as fast as we want and in the way we want, but he is, nevertheless, always with us knowing our thoughts and hearing our prayers.

Most of what we know about the resurrection comes from the four gospels. However, I would like to quote St. Paul on the resurrection. He writes in I Cor.: "For I handed on to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures; that he was buried; that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures; that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than 500 brothers at once, most of whom are still living; ..after that he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one born abnormally, he appeared to me." (I Cor. 15, 3-8)

I wanted to share this with you for it is the oldest written text we have about the resurrection. It was written about 54 AD, roughly 20 years after Jesus' death and resurrection and 15 years before the first gospel was written. The text begins with Paul saying "I handed on to you...what I also received." This is a way of saying that what he is going to tell them is already an official part of the Church's tradition. Paul wrote this to the Corinthians because Greek philosophy denied the possibility of resurrection of the body and thus they denied Christ's resurrection. Paul doesn't even mention a number of other appearances the gospels tell us about; for example, the appearance to Mary Magdalene and the other women. Although none of the gospels mention it, certainly one would expect that he appeared to his mother. When one considers the number of

appearances and the number of people Jesus appeared to and that he appeared in Jerusalem and in Galilee, it's no wonder some of the details are not consistent.

Even if the traditions we read in the gospels and in Paul are not always consistent, the tradition is constant in proclaiming Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to the Apostles and to many other people too. Our gospel today tells us a story about Thomas and how he came to faith. We call Thomas doubting Thomas, but his doubting helps us to believe. In calling Thomas a doubter, people forget so were the rest of the Apostles doubters until they saw Jesus.

When Jesus appeared to the Apostles he came not just to show he had risen. He did want to show he was alive which gave evidence that he was who he said he was - God's son. Now he came with another purpose too. He came to send his Apostles out to continue his work of bringing peace, healing the sick, forgiving the sinner, calling people to accept Jesus' teachings and proclaiming eternal life. He came to give the Holy Spirit to the Apostles so they could bring that same Spirit to the rest of the world. He promised he would work with them when he told them: I will be with you always. He promises us that today as we gather in his name. Amen.

### **Third Sunday of Easter – A Cycle**

**April 30, 2017**

**INTRODUCTION:** In our first reading we hear Peter's first sermon – the one he gave on that first Pentecost. Remember this was the same Peter who just a few weeks prior to this speech denied he even knew Jesus. At Pentecost, however, when he was filled with the Spirit of God, he spoke out boldly about Jesus - that God raised Jesus back to life after his crucifixion and he is now exalted at God's right hand as Messiah and Savior.

**HOMILY:** One of the priests in our Archdiocese preached about Easter this past Sunday and after Mass was over a parishioner asked him "why are you preaching about Easter? Don't you know Easter is over?" The parishioner must have been thinking of Christmas when it seems as if everybody thinks Christmas is over on December 26. Actually the parishioner didn't know the liturgical season of Easter continues on for seven weeks. It's too great a feast to limit to only one day.

Today we hear about two disciples to whom Jesus appeared on Easter Sunday. I imagine them to be a husband and wife who maybe witnessed Jesus' crucifixion and now they had given up any hope they had that maybe Jesus could lead the Jewish people into freedom. A stranger joined them as they went their way, possibly their way led back to their home where they could invite Jesus in for dinner.

I asked myself why St. Luke would tell us this story? Nothing is known about Cleopas, even less is known about his traveling companion. No one knows exactly where Emmaus was located. Maybe Luke told the story because it was such a lovely story. I think there was more to it than that. Perhaps Luke's hearers needed to hear about this event to strengthen their faith in the resurrection and in the Eucharist. If so, I'm sure this story gave testimony which helped. My hunch is that Luke also told this story to

encourage fellow believers during times of fear or discouragement. He wants us to know that through good times and bad, Jesus never leaves us even if we have given up on him. We all have times when our faith is tested, when we feel as if he has abandoned us. During those times we forget he has already won victory over our ultimate enemy – sin and death. It is that victory we celebrate each time we are at Mass, every time we hear those words of Jesus “take this and eat, this is my body.” Especially we celebrate this victory during the Easter season. Before he ascended he said to his disciples “I am with you always to the end of time.”

His presence with us takes many forms, forms that we often do not recognize. He comes to us in the poor, he comes to us in the friend, he comes to us sometimes in suffering, he comes to us in nature, he comes to us in visible and invisible ways, he comes to us in the Church and in the Scriptures. He comes in sacraments, and, most profoundly, he comes in the Eucharist. Whether we feel it or not doesn't matter. He is present. “I am with you always.”

The story of Jesus joining his two disciples is our story. He is walking with us, he is trying to help us understand, he is feeding us not just bread for the body but food for our mind and heart. All we have to do is listen. If we catch on to what he is saying, we may want to tell everyone all about what we experienced on our journey. Amen.