

## 5th Sunday of Lent April 2, 2006

Jesus had recently raised his dead friend, Lazarus, back to life. The raising of Lazarus took place in Bethany, a village just a couple of miles outside of Jerusalem. Today's gospel takes place on Palm Sunday in Jerusalem. When they heard Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, many who were impressed with Jesus' miracles, especially the raising of Lazarus, and many who were there to celebrate Passover, gathered around him and escorted him into Jerusalem with palms, chanting "Hosanna to the Son of David." When Jesus' enemies saw this, they were filled with jealousy and said to one another: "We've lost! Look! The whole world has gone after him." This is where the events in today's gospel begins. The gospel tells us some Greeks who had come to worship at the Passover feast wanted to see Jesus. Jerusalem would swell with worshippers during the great feasts - especially the feast of Passover. People from distant places would often come several days ahead of time so they could find a place to stay. This request from foreigners, non-Jews, to see Jesus was a sign to him his hour had come. He had come to save all people and he knew that he had to die in order to reach all people. He knew his death would be the most tortuous form of death ever devised by human beings, yet he refers to it as his glorification. "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." He would be glorified in his faithfulness to his Father's work, he would be glorified in laying down his life for all of us whom he loves (greater love than this, no one has than that he lay down his life for his friends.) He would be glorified in his resurrection.

In calling it his glorification, Jesus was being brave with six days yet to go before his death, but we hear also his struggle in today's gospel. "I am troubled now," he said. "Yet what should I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But it was for this purpose that I came to this hour." That sounds very much like Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemani the night before he died. We hear of Jesus' struggle in today's second reading too: "he offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death..."

When I was in Israel, visiting the Garden of Gethsemani, I could see how easy it would have been for Jesus to walk away that night. Jesus could have taken the steps going up the side of the Mount of Olives to Bethany and been with his friends, Martha, Mary and Lazarus, in less than an hour. He could have gotten some food and water and disappeared into the wilderness for a few days. The Roman soldiers would not have wasted their time to go after him. They had no quarrel with him. He could have quietly returned to Galilee to lead a simple life working in a carpentry shop somewhere and no one would have heard of him again. His apostles would have dispersed and all his healings and his teachings about God's love and salvation would have been quickly forgotten. But his mission was to save the world, not himself. He would have

betrayed his Father, his mission and himself had he run away.

Like a seed planted in the ground, he had to die to what he was in order to live in a new way. He had to die to this life so he could fill the whole world with his presence and his grace.

This is the new covenant Jeremiah tells us about in today's first reading, a covenant written in our hearts. The covenant becomes a part of us because he becomes a part of us through his Holy Spirit and we become a part of him. That union is deepened each time we pray, each time we love unselfishly, each time we are faithful to our mission in life, each time we celebrate the Eucharist and participate in the blood of the new and eternal covenant.

Jesus had the option of taking what appeared to be the easy way out. Even then, his decision to stand by what he did and taught was hard. He warns us that sometimes it's hard for us, too, to do what we have to do. We just heard him say in the gospel: "Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life." This was literally true for many of Christ's followers. Many people had to give up their lives to remain faithful to Christ. Gratefully in this land today, we do not have to sacrifice our life for our faith, but to be faithful is not always the easiest path. Coming to Mass on Sunday, staying chaste, being honest, doing for others, forgiving injuries, loving our neighbor, especially the obnoxious ones, is not always easy.

Today's gospel is essentially a theological reflection on the cross, Jesus' cross and ours. Let us ask our Lord to help us remain faithful and know that all crosses are temporary, while the glory of union with Christ and following his lead is eternal.

## **Passion Sunday**

### **April 9, 2006**

We hear today from St. Mark, the earliest and the shortest of our gospels. There are only 16 chapters in the whole gospel. Yet almost one third of his gospel (five chapters) describes what happened in the last week of Jesus' life, from his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday until his resurrection on Easter Sunday. St. John has even more of his gospel devoted to the passion-resurrection narrative. St. John's gospel devotes almost the entire second half of his gospel to this one week in Jesus' life here on earth.

Here is the reason for pointing this out. Everything Jesus did and said during three years of public ministry was important, but the events of his life from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday, events we commemorate this coming week are the most important of

all. For some people Christmas may seem to be the most important feast in the entire year, with all the celebrations that happen around that time. Certainly the birth of Jesus is worth celebrating with great joy, but we would not have even heard of Jesus if it hadn't been for the events that happened between Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday. If you miss out on what we commemorate this week, you are missing out on the main event on which our faith is built. I invite you to come to whatever services you can come to. If you can't come to services, please try to put some time aside and get out your bibles and read and pray about what happened to Jesus between Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday. Easter Sunday will not have much depth of meaning for us without an awareness of what Jesus said and did this week.

We hear a lot today about a few gospels that carry such biblical names as: the gospels of Thomas, of the Hebrews, of the Egyptians, of Mary, of Peter, of Philip and now the latest, the gospel of Judas. They give us interesting and sometimes even bizarre interpretations of the life of Jesus. We have to remember the word gospel means "good news" and it is the good news of salvation Jesus taught through his life, death and resurrection. And what Jesus did and taught was preached by apostles who were witnesses of Jesus' life (and by the way, the Greek word for witness is 'martyr'). The gospel was preached and taught for twenty or thirty years before anything was written down. These strange gospels we've been hearing about were written much later than the original four we have and they were largely ignored by the early Church, not as a power struggle or to hide any arcane truths, but because they did not reflect the original teachings of the apostles and they did not reflect the faith of the early Christian Community.

The four gospels the Church has preserved and taught have given Christians through the centuries a vision of Jesus that was considered authentic and true from earliest times. They have given Christians something secure to hold on to in the ups and downs of life. Through the gospels we know that God's love can and will overcome all evil and even death itself. That's the good news. Our Lord often doesn't run the world the way we think he should. He doesn't always give us everything we want. But in trying times he will always be with us, if we open our hearts to him. I know what a strength meditation on the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus has always been for me.

I recommend you take your palm home today. Keep it somewhere where you'll see it from time to time to remind you Jesus entered Jerusalem knowing fully what was ahead for him. Let it remind you of Jesus' courage, his faithfulness to his mission, his victory over sin and death. Let it remind you of his love for you and for me.

## Holy Thursday April 13, 2006

I have come across statistics, and I'm sure many of you have too, about memory: how the percent of what we remember from what we read and what we hear is rather small, while we remember a very high percent of the things we do. God, of course, knew that long before statisticians showed up on the face of the earth, and so in order that we would remember the things he wanted us to remember, he gave us things to do.

Our first reading this evening (Exodus 12, 1-8.11-14) took us back 1300 years before Christ, when the Hebrew people were on the run, fleeing slavery in Egypt, on their way to a new life of freedom in a promised land. While on their journey God revealed himself to them. He told them of the special love he would have for them and how they were to love him and love one another. And God did not want them to forget this, so he gave them something to do so that they would always remember. Their annual Passover celebration would help them remember what God had done for them and what God wanted them to do in turn. We heard in today's first reading God telling his people: "This day shall be a memorial feast for you which all your generations shall celebrate with pilgrimage to the Lord as a perpetual institution."

We are not slaves of a foreign country like the Jews were 1300 years before Christ, but many of us still find ourselves on the run, having places to go, things to do, people to see and meetings to attend. God does not want us either to forget what he has done for us and what he wants us to do in turn. When we're on the run all the time it's very easy to forget these things. So God gave us things to do to help us remember.

Just as the Jews celebrated God's love for them at a special meal, so it is at a special meal that we are to remember and celebrate God's love for us. That meal is called the Eucharist (a word which means appropriately enough: "thanksgiving"). In tonight's second reading (I Cor. 11, 23-26) St. Paul gives us the earliest written account of the Eucharist. We are to come together to eat and drink the body and blood of our Lord. And in this short passage we are told twice: "Do this in remembrance of me."

In tonight's gospel we hear about another thing we are to do: "As I have done, so you must do..." (Jn. 13, 1-15). At the time of Jesus, people wore sandals and they didn't have cars. Lots of animals traveled on the same roads people walked on, so you can imagine their feet got pretty dusty and dirty. If you came to someone's house for dinner or they came to your house, it wouldn't be pleasant for the guest to have to sit through a nice meal with smelly dirty feet. So it was standard procedure when a guest came, someone washed the guest's feet, usually a servant, or if there were no servants, one of the children had that nasty job. The fact that the need no longer exists in this day and age does not mean we are off the hook when Jesus tells us "as I have done, so you must do..." There are lots of other gracious and hospitable and humbling things

we can do for one another instead of washing feet. And so our foot washing tonight is a mere symbol to help us remember how we are to serve one another.

These two things we are to do, the celebration of the Eucharist and washing of the feet, not only help us remember what God has done for us but also what God expects of us in turn. And in these two things we have an expression of two virtues essential to our relationship with God: faith and love. Let me say a word about each one. First faith: I am sure your faith is tested every time you hear those words: "This is my body." "This is my blood." My faith is tested too. Every morning I am called to believe those words, believing that God has given to human beings, to people like me, the power to change bread and wine into the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ. It was a test failed by many people who initially followed Jesus. When Jesus first spoke to his followers about the Eucharist, St. John tells us many left him at that point. When they walked away he didn't call them back to say they misunderstood him. He knew they were leaving him precisely because they did understand him. All he did was ask the apostles if they were going to leave too. We all know how Peter responded: "Lord, to whom would we go? You alone have the words of eternal life."

The second virtue essential in our relationship with God is love. Jesus had been doing a servant's work all his life, healing and teaching, even to the point that sometimes he and his apostles couldn't find time to rest or even to eat. In serving others, washing feet was probably a piece of cake for him. The hardest job he would have would happen on the next day when he would give his life for us. Is it possible we would ever have to go that far for one another? Sometimes. What mother or father wouldn't put their life at risk for their child. And whenever I have the funeral of a veteran, I am always deeply moved when I see that American flag draping the casket. I am touched to realize that this person was willing to risk his or her life for me, for my safety and security and freedom. But even if we're not called to give up our life for someone else, when we recall Jesus' love it prompts us to respond by loving him more and by trying to be more loving toward one another.

Many of us feel that we're running all the time. And so to help us remember there's more to life than stress and pressure, Jesus gave us two things to do to help us remember. We are to share a special meal that will sustain us spiritually, just as the food we eat each day sustains us physically and we are to serve one another in humility and love. Tonight we remember when it all began.

## **Easter** **April 16, 2006**

When England was fighting Napoleon at the battle of Waterloo, the English government had signs placed in a variety of cities to let the citizens of Great Britain know how the war was going. One such sign was on the bell tower of Winchester

Cathedral. When the sign went up that summer day in 1815, it was partly obscured by cloud and fog, but the people could see enough of the sign to be able to read: "England defeated." Everyone who saw it felt defeated too, until the cloud lifted and they could see the whole sign which read: "England defeated Napoleon." Within seconds, their sorrow was turned into joy and defeat was swallowed up in victory.

When Jesus died on the cross, those who believed in him felt lost and defeated. Jesus was dead and so were their hopes for a better world. But in just a couple of days their sorrow was turned into joy and defeat was swallowed up in victory.

A fourth grade teacher planned to perform an Easter pageant for the parents of her students. Every boy and girl had a part to play. After all the parts were given out, the last child to receive a part was Johnny. He got to be the stone in front of the tomb. No special costume was required for this part. All he had to do was to roll himself into a ball and pretend to be the stone. The teacher felt sorry for Johnny since all the other children got to wear costumes so before the final performance she asked Johnny if he wanted another part so he could wear a costume. Johnny did not want to change. He said: "it's the most important part. If the stone doesn't roll away, then nobody can get into the tomb and see that it is empty."

A very smart little boy! The stone had to be moved away not so Jesus could get out. He had already risen and was out of there. The stone had to be removed for us so that we could see the tomb was empty; so we could see that death had been robbed of its power; so we could see that a new world order had begun; so we could see the truth in Jesus' words: "I am the resurrection and the life."

At Easter we see lillies, Easter baskets, colored eggs, Easter bunnies, new outfits, etc., but the main symbol is the empty tomb, now in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. We've all seen artistic interpretations of the resurrection, but no one but the Roman guards were there when it happened and they reported it only to the high priests. The only evidence we have of the resurrection is an empty tomb and many eyewitness accounts of people who saw him after his resurrection, people who were willing to go to their death to witness that he was alive and they indeed did see him.

Those who saw him knew that what they were seeing was entirely different than anything they had ever seen before. Jesus was not just a dead man who had come back again to live the life he had before. He came back to a new kind of life, one that is beyond our ability to relate to so it is shrouded in mystery for us, and yet it is very real. He could be seen and touched, he could eat food with his friends, he could move from one place to another effortlessly, walls and locked doors could not keep him in or out and those who saw him reported he even looked different. Yet when they saw him they knew it was no one else but the Lord.

His friends eventually came to know that when they saw him, his resurrection was more than God's endorsement on his good life. They knew his resurrection had something to do with them. The young man at the tomb told the women "he is going before you to Galilee." (Mk. 16, 1-7) His friends came to know that he was always ahead of us and was always going before us, calling us to follow him. He is our good shepherd, guiding us to new life. His resurrection was not just a personal favor to Jesus. It is a preview for each and every one of us who will allow ourselves to be guided by his word and sacraments.

When Jesus told his friend Martha when her brother died: "I am the resurrection and the life," he added: "whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." Because of this St. Paul tells us today: "If then you were raised with Christ, seek what is above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Think of what is above, not of what is on earth." (Coloss. 3, 1-4)

Jesus overcame the power of evil and death in his resurrection. This does not mean evil and death no longer exist in the world. And because they do exist, many people discount Jesus' resurrection. It is true, the resurrection has not removed evil and death from the face of the earth, but it tells us evil and death will not have the last word. They are not the final outcome; they cannot ultimately defeat us if we share Christ's life. Today we celebrate Jesus' victory and our own. "This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad." Amen.

## **Second Sunday of Easter** **April 23, 2006**

The chief rabbi in Jerusalem contacted the Holy Father and invited him to a game of golf. He thought it would be a good gesture for improved Jewish-Christian relations. The Holy Father agreed with the idea but said he wasn't a good golfer, so he asked if he could send a high level prelate to be his substitute. That was agreeable with the chief rabbi. He consequently asked around among his cardinals whether any of them were good golfers so they could stand in as his representative. None of them felt they could do the job, but one of the cardinals suggested Jack Nicklas. He told the Holy Father that Jack Nicklas was a good Catholic and perhaps the Holy Father could make him a cardinal. So that's what the Holy Father did. He made Jack Nicklas a cardinal and he was the Holy Father's representative for this big inter-religious golf game. When it was over Cardinal Jack Nicklas called the Holy Father and the Holy Father asked how it went. Jack answered "I've got good news and bad news for you." The Holy Father said "Well, start with the good news." So Jack told him: "it was the best game I ever played. I felt like God was right there with me on every stroke. It couldn't have been better." "Well," asked the Holy Father, how could there be bad news after that?" Jack Nicklas answered "I lost by two strokes to Rabbi Tiger Woods."

In some corners of the world this is known as holy humor Sunday. It's a day for laughter, because the devil got defeated by Jesus' resurrection. So I had to tell you something that would give you a laugh.

Some of you might also know this Sunday as "Divine Mercy Sunday," when Jesus forgave his apostles for abandoning him and offered them "peace." He also commissioned them to bring his mercy and salvation to others by giving them the power to forgive sins.

The gospel talks to us too about Jesus giving the apostles the gift of the Holy Spirit and the apostle Thomas and his doubts and, more importantly, his profound expression of faith. There are so many ideas my homily could develop.

What I want to focus on is Jesus' greeting to the apostles: "peace be with you." When we read the gospels, the normal greeting was "Χαίρε" which means "rejoice!" Jesus obviously meant "peace" because he repeated it.

This gospel has a great deal of meaning for me personally and I'm going to tell you why. I was ordained almost 42 years ago, just as the Vatican Council was finishing up its work. People had high hopes for all the changes that the Vatican Council might bring. Perhaps they envisioned a Church such as we read about in today's first reading, where there was great unity and peace and love for each other. Vatican II did great work, but about five or ten years after the Council was over, it was obvious it didn't do everything people expected. Most people were happy with the changes it brought about. But there were some who liked the old ways and they were disgruntled. Some stopped going to Church and some broke away from the Church and began their own Church. Others were upset because there weren't more changes and they turned away from the Church also.

It was a difficult time for me as a priest too. Priests I knew and admired resigned. Some of the pastors I had to serve under didn't like the changes from the Vatican Council and they saw me as a wild liberal they had to try to keep in line. I was thirty years old by then and I was told when to come in at night, how to dress, who to have as friends, and for my weekly "day off" I was permitted to visit my parents on Friday night after I had finished my day's chores. By 30 years of age I thought I knew everything and resented someone telling me how to live my life. Our seminary professors assured us that if we studied our theology we could handle any situation. I guess it was troubling to find out that I still had a lot to learn.

I'm not looking for sympathy. I'm just trying to give you a picture of my own internal distress. I had no inner peace. At that time I felt restless, depressed and disturbed. At charismatic prayer meetings I heard people give testimony of how God answered their prayers. Yet I was so troubled and when I prayed I felt as if God wasn't listening.



Perhaps I wasn't listening well enough. But one day I listened as someone read today's gospel. It was one of those moments when I knew God was speaking to me. I heard it loud and clear: "Peace be with you." It didn't come all at once, but hearing those words of the risen Jesus gave me hope. It assured me "peace" was something God wanted for us, and I prayed for it with greater conviction that it would come. I knew it would come because Jesus desires us to have it. Just knowing that was the beginning of a feeling of peace. As I prayed for it, the Lord guided me as to how to find it. I tell you this story so that you might know that God wants peace for us. It was what he promised at the Last Supper: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid."

That is my prayer for all of you this second Sunday of Easter: may you know and experience Christ's peace, a peace which the world cannot give. Amen.

### **Third Sunday of Easter April 30, 2006**

A mother proudly told her pastor: "My teenage son has finally learned one bible verse. It's Luke 24, verse 41 where Jesus asks his disciples (as we just heard in today's reading) 'Do you have anything here to eat?'"

The apostles must have been in great confusion by Easter Sunday night. Jesus' tomb was empty. Peter and John had seen the empty tomb in the morning, but they had seen nothing else. Some women, who were Jesus' followers, had talked with an angel who assured them Jesus had risen. Mary Magdalene herself had seen our Lord. Later in the day Jesus appeared to two other disciples, walked and talked with them, broke bread with them and then disappeared. Those same disciples had just arrived at where the apostles were staying and were telling their story when Jesus suddenly appeared to all of them. Surprised, shocked, disbelief, St. Luke says "terrified," probably embarrassed, too, realizing they had all abandoned him after his arrest. What a mixed bag of emotions they must have been experiencing. No wonder he greets them by saying to them: "Peace be with you." Jesus dispels their doubts about whether they could believe what they were seeing and assures them they are not seeing a ghost by inviting them to feel him, to know that he is flesh and bone. He even ate a piece of fish, food they themselves had prepared, to prove to them that he was real and that he had really risen. And yet he appeared to be different than before. The wounds of the nails and the spear were still in his hands and feet and side. But when he appeared to Mary Magdalene she didn't recognize him until he spoke her name. The two disciples didn't recognize him until he sat down and broke bread with them. There was no doubt it was Jesus, but he was different.

He not only looked different, but he was different in other ways too. He didn't come knocking on their door in order to get in. He just suddenly stood in their midst. The same thing happened with the others who saw him. When his visit to Mary or the two disciples or the apostles had come to an end, he simply vanished. It was as if he was always with them, and sometimes he allowed them to see him but most of the time they couldn't.

Human beings have invented all kinds of marvelous things. There are great discoveries in medicine that can add years to people's lives. There are wonderful inventions that can make life much more comfortable and enjoyable. We can walk on the moon and we can explore the atom. We have powerful weapons that can cause untold destruction. But who has ever discovered how to overcome the power of death which every living thing must eventually succumb to? The resurrection of Jesus is the most fantastic event that this world could ever know. Since the days when human beings lived in caves, all our inventions, all our discoveries, all our power added together cannot begin to equal the glory of Christ's resurrection that introduced into our world and our history new and eternal life.

The resurrection celebrated not just Jesus' glory but our own future glory if we will open our minds and hearts to him. Jesus' resurrection is a preview of God's plans for those who are his children in Christ. Is this one of those "something for nothing" offers? Have you ever received a phone call where someone said to you: "Mrs. Jones, I have good news for you, or I have this free gift for you!" I usually say, thank you, I'm not interested! We always know when someone we don't know wants to give us something for free, he wants something. Is religion giving us something for free? The answer is "yes" and "no." The answer is "yes" in the sense that God's life offered to us in Jesus is not something we have earned or merited. It **is** a free gift. That's why it's called "grace," the Latin word for gift. At the same time God does want something from us. Eternal life is not automatic. We are not saved without our participation and our cooperation. What does God want? It's simple. He wants us to give up our sins. He tells us this in all three of today's readings. In the first reading, St. Peter tells us: "repent, therefore, and be converted." St. John tells us in the second reading we have to keep God's commandments. Jesus, when he was talking with the apostles, told them to preach "repentance for the forgiveness of sins." God is not really asking too much of a sacrifice from us because it's our sins that keep us from the peace and happiness and joy God wants us to have. Remember it was sin that created problems for the human race in the beginning. God created Adam and Eve to be happy as was symbolized by the Garden of Eden. It was because of their sin that they lost that happiness.

A special help God gives us to keep us close to him, in his grace and in his peace, is the Eucharist. The fact that Christ gives himself to us as food tells us something. It tells us we always need him. A person can't eat just every now and then. We have to constantly feed this body of ours if we are going to stay healthy and have the energy we need to get through each day. Jesus is telling us we can't just come to him every now and then. We need his help all the time. So today we come to him again to be taught, to be fed, to be touched by his loving presence. We ask him to keep us filled with the life he has given us and which we hope to share in for all eternity.