

## Third Sunday of Easter

April 6, 2008

**INTRODUCTION:** In our first reading we hear Peter's first sermon which was on Pentecost Sunday. Just a few weeks prior to this speech he denied he even knew Jesus. Now he speaks out boldly about Jesus. I want to call your attention to one little detail. We are told he stood up "with the Eleven." It's one of many places in the gospels that the position of Peter is shown as primary among the rest of the apostles. This coming week our Holy Father, the successor of St. Peter, will make a short visit to our country.

**HOMILY:** Today's gospel is a story of discouragement and hope. We all experience discouragements and disappointment at times throughout our lives. We even get discouraged with God. St. Luke tells us a story today about how two people met with discouragement after seeing how Jesus had been put to death. They had hoped he would drive the Romans out of Israel and restore freedom and self-government to Israel. When Jesus died their hopes were shattered and they walked away. How often we want to walk away from God when he doesn't do the things we want him to.

Briefly, let us recall the events in today's gospel. Jesus joined his two disciples and entered into conversation with them. They didn't recognize him. He explained to them from the Scriptures that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer as he did. As evening approached they invited him to stay with them. He did, and broke bread with them and then they recognized him. They returned to Jerusalem to the apostles and believers.

Even when we turn our back on God, he doesn't turn his back on us. St. Luke wants us to know that even in our discouragement and disappointment we are not alone. We may not recognize God's presence as we go. But it's there. Most of us remember the poem that was very popular a few years ago: footprints in the sand. He promised us: "I will be with you always."

St. Luke is telling us also that in hard times, the Scriptures can throw new light on the difficulties we are having. Jesus helped his two disciples to understand the Scriptures better, renewing their hope. As they said "Were not our hearts burning within us as he spoke to us on the way and opened the Scriptures to us." I can't count how many times that has happened to me that when I felt discouraged, God's word lifted my spirits. God's word is always a word that gives hope.

As the story goes on, the disciples invited Jesus to stay with them longer. What was happening there? Did they, for a moment, forget about their own sadness to think about the safety of this stranger? Travel in those days was dangerous, especially to travel by oneself. Or was Jesus beginning to get through to them and they didn't want their time with him to come to an end? For whatever reason they asked him to stay longer.

Before they knew it, Jesus was breaking bread with them and suddenly they recognized Jesus

and they knew he was alive. Luke doesn't really tell us this was a Eucharist, but notice the words Luke uses to describe what Jesus did: Jesus took the bread, said the blessing, broke it and gave it to them. These are the same gestures St. Luke used to describe what Jesus did at the Last Supper. Furthermore, whenever St. Luke always refers to the Eucharist in the Acts of the Apostles, (the other book he wrote) he call it the Breaking of the Bread. If it wasn't a Eucharist Jesus did with the two disciples, St. Luke certainly has this in mind when he tells us this is when the disciples recognized who they had been talking to all this time.

There is one last piece to this story, the two disciples returned to community of believers. They had given up their hope in Jesus as the savior of God's people and they walked away from the community of those still gathered in Jerusalem who believed in him. Their encounter with Christ on the road, in the Scriptures, in the hospitality they offered him, in the breaking of bread restored all their hope and joy. And they came back to the Church, the community of believers they had left. It is there they would continue to remain united with Christ.

When disappointment fills our lives with sadness and darkness, we can let it consume us or we can let God help us find light and healing, for God is our only hope.

### **Fourth Sunday of Easter**

**April 13, 2008**

Modern shepherds often control their sheep with dogs, horses, pick-up trucks or other advanced technological methods. Shepherds in the ancient world didn't have such methods and they guarded and guided their sheep themselves. Shepherds make their living caring for sheep and, since sheep require full time care, they were together almost constantly with their sheep. Old time shepherds gave each lamb its own name just as we give names to our pets. Like our pets recognize our voice and come running when we call them, unless they're cats, which are very independent, so also the sheep came running when their shepherd called.

Even though we do not see real sheep and shepherds very often, still the image of the good shepherd is one of the most comforting images in the Scriptures. The best remembered and loved psalm of all 150 psalms is Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd." It symbolizes God's protection and care and guidance. But there are two sides to that coin. If he is to be our shepherd and protector, he expects that we will follow him. We will hear his voice.

A second image Jesus used in today's gospel is that he is the gate of the sheepfold. Whoever goes in and out through him will be safe and find pasture. Gates serve the same function as doors. Think of how important doors are. They let us in our homes where we find safety and family. They let us go out so we can meet friends or make a living or buy things we need or do something fun. They close out people who shouldn't be there. Jesus is telling us as doors and gates are important so is he. When he is part of our comings and goings, when we make him

central in our lives, when we ask his blessing on all our activities, our life will be secure and our happiness will be ensured.

Does this mean nothing bad will ever happen if we follow Christ? If it were true that if we do everything God wants, God would do everything we want, church would be packed every week. I know there are rewards in this life when we stay faithful to him. I have certainly tried to stay on God's good side and God has been very good to me, but as we all know bad things do happen to good people. Even many of Jesus' good friends suffered, some were even tortured and put to death as Jesus was. But it's not just to protect us in this world that Jesus came. The last verse in today's gospel is one of my favorites. Jesus said "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly." Or as it's sometimes translated: "I came so that they might have life and have it to the full." When people ask why Jesus doesn't keep bad things from happening to those who are faithful to him, perhaps one answer could be that life in this world is not where the abundant life really is. Even if we have looks, popularity, health, wealth, youth, wisdom and everything else our hearts desire, we don't "have it all." We'll always feel some emptiness in our hearts, we'll never be totally satisfied, because our hearts were made for perfect union with God, and we won't know what that's like until we get to heaven. Our faith is that's where Christ our shepherd wants to lead us and that's why he came to us.

### **Fifth Sunday of Easter**

**April 20, 2008**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Three weeks ago we heard St. Luke tell us in the Acts of the Apostles how the first Christians got along so beautifully. They devoted themselves to prayer and instruction from the Apostles and generously shared their material possessions so that no one was in need among them. As the community grew, so did the problems. The first Christians were probably conservative Jews from around Jerusalem who spoke Hebrew or Aramaic. They were culturally and traditionally different from converted Jews who lived in other parts of the Roman Empire and who spoke the common language of the day, Greek. They are referred to in today's first reading as the Hellenists. Besides this cultural difference, there were economic issues. Widows in those days were entirely dependent on the community for their basic needs. The Hellenists, those who spoke Greek, complained that their widows were being discriminated against when food was being given out at Christian gatherings. The Apostles felt their role was not to give out food but to stay focused on prayer and preaching so they solved the problem by creating a new office in the Church, the diaconate.

#### **HOMILY**

Our gospel reading puts us at the Last Supper with Jesus and the Apostles. Jesus knew that the Apostles' world would soon be turned upside down. In spite of repeated warnings, the Apostles were not ready for what was going to take place once they left the Supper room. So he gave

them one last word of wisdom: “don’t be troubled, don’t be afraid, just trust me.” What an order! In spite of Jesus’ words not to be troubled, they were devastated after he was arrested and put to death. If Jesus’ words at that time did not give much comfort to the Apostles, they have been giving comfort in times of suffering to all the rest of us for the past 2000 years. They are reflected in a very popular hymn: “Be not afraid.”

Jesus describes to them why they should not be troubled or afraid: because there would be a better life ahead for them and he was going away to prepare a place for them so they could be with him forever. He told them there were many “dwelling places” in his Father’s house. Sometimes the word “dwelling places” is translated “mansions.” We have to carefully understand just what Jesus is saying here. Too often we interpret his words in a materialistic way, thinking of multi-million dollar homes we will have in heaven as a reward for being good. Some people may even picture a Mercedes in the garage, a pool in the back yard, a well-stocked wine cellar in the basement and 70 virgins waiting to meet them. This kind of a vision reduced happiness to sheer materialism and that is not what happiness with God will be all about. The Greek word translated as “dwelling place” does not mean “mansion.” The word puts emphasis, not so much on a building or structure, as on the act of staying or dwelling. Reading further on in John’s gospel we learn that the “Father’s house” where Jesus is going and where there are many “dwelling places” is really to be understood as the experience of communion with God and with Jesus and being able to share in God’s glory. This will be a source of joy that is greater than anything we can know in this world. This may be a disheartening thought for those who are looking for material rewards or untold physical pleasures.

St. Paul tells us “What no one ever saw or heard, what no one ever thought could happen, is the very thing God prepared for those who love him.” (Translation: Good News Bible – I Cor 2,9) What’s ahead for us is beyond our understanding. True, Jesus did use images we could understand to give us a hint of what heaven would be like. Heaven is like a hidden treasure, a pearl of great worth, a wedding banquet a king has for his son, a place without sadness or suffering or death. His examples can be very comforting to think about and can motivate us to live a holy life. What is more important to think about, though, is not what we’ll find when we enter into the next life as the way that leads there. It’s of major importance because if we don’t go the right way, we won’t end up in the right place. Our culture today tells us it doesn’t matter what way we follow, we’ll all end up in the same place. That’s not what Jesus tells us. Jesus tells us today “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” He is not only the way, but also the truth. Contrary to founders of certain different religions who have told their followers they have found the truth, Jesus goes further and tells us he is the truth! It is in him, in Jesus, we will see the glory of God as he tells Philip today. When Philip asked to be able to see the Father, Philip was thinking as we often do, that somehow God is hiding somewhere and if he would only show himself to us we would be happy. We don’t realize how much he wants us to see him and know him, to share his life and to know his joy. God is not made of material things. He can’t come out of hiding because he is not hiding from us. He is all around us, but we can only know him through a faith that fills our minds and hearts, and Jesus has pointed that way of faith out to us.

While I was praying the other day, the image of Jesus as a compass came to mind. A compass always points north. I don't understand exactly how magnetism works, but I know if I follow the way it points, it will not mislead me. I don't understand God perfectly either, because God is infinite and the infinite is too great for my finite mind. But I trust in Jesus, and I know that if I follow the way he points, he will not mislead me. He is the way, the truth and the life.

## **Sixth Sunday of Easter**

**April 27, 2008**

### **INTRODUCTION:**

Last week, in our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we heard about the institution of the diaconate, a word that comes from the Greek which means "service." Seven men were chosen by the community to care for the needs of the poor. In a short time, the first deacons did more than simply care for the poor. We have all heard of St. Stephen who became such a convincing preacher that his enemies killed him. He was the first martyr, a word that comes from the Greek that means witness. Today we hear about another of the original deacons, Philip. He too became a powerful healer and preacher and baptized many people into the faith of Christ. Baptizing continues to be part of the ministry of a deacon.

### **HOMILY**

In today's gospel Jesus is talking with his Apostles at the Last Supper. He was trying to prepare them, as best he could, for the shock and trauma they would go through when he would be arrested and crucified. He had just told them, as we heard last Sunday, that he was going to go to get a place ready for them in his Father's home, then he would come to take them with him so they would be with him always. In today's gospel he tells them that, although he is leaving them for a time, he would not abandon them. First of all, he would give them another Advocate. (The Greek word here for Advocate is *parakletos* which is hard to translate). Often it is left untranslated and is put into English as *paraclete*. When translators try to translate it, they use words like "Advocate," "Comforter," "Intercessor," "Helper," "Mediator." It means, basically, someone who will support you, stand up for you, or stand by your side to help you. Of course, Jesus was referring to the Holy Spirit. Jesus was not planning on leaving them with a substitute for himself for he said to them: "I will not leave you orphans. I will come to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me..." In other words, the Holy Spirit would be with them in addition to Jesus, but Jesus would be with them in a new way, a way they would know only through the help of the Spirit.

There are so many themes packed into today's readings, and I can only touch on a few of these ideas. One of the important themes is love. It is out of love that Jesus gives us the Holy Spirit. From the beginning he has loved us and he asks only for our love in return. In our gospel today he gives us a criterion to keep us from thinking love is just a matter of having warm, fuzzy feelings toward him. The test of true love for Jesus is to do his will, just as he has always done

the will of the Father. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." He says it twice in today's short gospel. In other words, love is measured more by what we do than by what we feel! I have found that to be such a hard message to get across to people. The attitude so many people have is: if they don't feel it, they don't think it is. It's not that feelings are bad. Having warm, loving feelings toward God or toward others is wonderful. But love has to go beyond just feelings or it's just superficial. Anyone who's married knows that!

Jesus describes the work of the Holy Spirit in numerous ways. Here he mentions two things about the Spirit: he tells us the Spirit will be with us always and he calls the Spirit the Spirit of Truth. I want to end with a little story I read recently. The partners at a huge New York law firm were discussing their most lucrative – and controversial – client: a gigantic chemical company. The managing partner summed up the situation: "Their billings are in excess of \$100 million a year, and they pay like clockwork. But for that, can we justify defending them against polluting rivers and lakes, unlawful toxic dump sites and emitting poisonous gasses into the atmosphere?" Everyone on the board was silent until the senior partner spoke up. "You're right, entirely right. We should raise our fees."

Too often, life is like that. We use all kinds of defense mechanisms, rationalizations, justifications, denials, projections, etc. to avoid dealing with the truth. Jesus called the Paraclete the Spirit of Truth. Facing the truth without regard for profit, power, comfort, convention or popularity takes courage and help from the Holy Spirit. May the Spirit of Truth Christ gives us guide us to recognize the wisdom in his commands to us and to know his loving presence with us as we come to the Eucharist today. He is with us always; we have his word on that.