

Series C

The Resurrection of our Lord

1. *Exodus 15:1-11. Moses and Israel sing in praise of God's deliverance.*

2. *1 Corinthians 15:1-11. Paul confesses his faith in Christ's resurrection.*

3. *Luke 24:1-11. The women come to the tomb and find it empty.*

Luke's empty tomb story has several typically Lukan features. First, the scene has an aura of calm when compared to Mark's report that the women ran away frightened and dumbstruck, or Matthew's picture of the angel who comes and scares the soldiers to death. This same calmness was in evidence throughout Luke's passion narrative. Second, the two men whose clothing reminds the reader of the Transfiguration in Luke (9:29-30), and whose question to the women reminds the reader of the ascension scene in Acts (1:10-11), speak a message which is one of Luke's most consistent themes: "It was necessary (*dei*) that the Son of Man be delivered . . . and on the third day rise." Third, the centrality of Jerusalem in Luke is accommodated in the same speech, as the women are not bidden to go to Galilee as in Matthew and Mark. Instead, they are to remember what Jesus had said while they were all still in Galilee.

The women do remember, presumably what Luke has reported in the speech between Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi and the Transfiguration, that Jesus had taught them all this back then, and so the women spread the word "to the eleven and all the rest." Luke may be working on some secondary issues here, such as the difficulty it would have been to the primitive church to be dependent for their credibility upon the testimony of a handful of women. More important for Luke is a matter which was of utmost importance to the earliest Christians, and which all four canonical gospels find a way to treat in some way. That was the question concerning where the risen Jesus was, and what, if anything, he was doing. "You say this Jesus is risen from the dead, that his tomb was found empty. Then where is he? Show me." The church

was faced almost immediately with a risen, but absent, leader and Lord. Eventually, in the Emmaus story of Luke 24:13-35, Luke will assert that the risen Lord can be known to the community in the breaking of the bread and in examining the scriptures in search of the necessarily suffering messiah.

But the clues for finding the risen Lord in the present absence begin already at the tomb when the angelic pair tells them, "Remember. Remember what he said to you, what he taught you. Remember." Frederick Buechner (*Wishful Thinking*, p. 58) says there are two kinds of remembering. "One is to make an excursion from the living present back into the dead past. The other way is to summon the dead past back into the living present. The young widow remembers her husband, and he is there beside her." Both kinds occur in the biblical tradition, especially in celebrations like Passover. Every generation is to remember this night as though it was the very generation which lived the first night of passover, ate this flat bread, tasted the bitter tears. That is to go back to a past which was not one's own so as to make it one's own. But also in the biblical tradition remembering is bringing someone from the past into the present, re-membering them, giving them once more flesh and blood as it were. This is at least some of what Jesus meant when he asked that his followers drink his bread and cup "in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19).

Where is the risen Lord and what is he doing? He is remembered and re-membered in the eucharistic community, where he lives and works his salutary, compassionate healing through the members of his body, the church. Hence, on the morning of the Resurrection of our Lord, we celebrate not only the first empty tomb, whose temporary dweller rose and has now left the space and time bound world of the living and the dead. We celebrate also in our re-membering of him how he lives within us, how he is hid now in our lives, in our bodies, and we in his. No tomb can hold us, either, and should we forget that, as we gape perplexed into a tomb of a loved one, or one prepared for us, there is the angelic question: "Why do you seek the living among the dead? Remember . . . Remember!"

The Second Sunday of Easter

1. Acts 5:12, 17-32. An angel releases Peter and the others from their prison, and they testify to Jesus' resurrection.

2. Revelation 1:4-18. The vision of the risen Son of Man, who claims the keys to Death and Hades.

3. John 20:19-31. The risen Jesus appears to the disciples, breathes on them, and commissions them to forgive sins.

Today's lessons all tell of prisons. In Acts 5, Peter and the others find themselves in Jerusalem's "common prison," put there by Sadducees jealous of their power to heal. Death and Hades are the prisons which hold all of humankind in the Revelation reading. In the gospel lesson, the disciples huddle behind locked doors as prisoners of their own fear. All three prisons are broken, however, and the inmates freed. Moreover, all are freed *for* something as well as *from* their captivity.

John 20:19-23 is the Johannine equivalent of Luke's Pentecost story. The risen Christ, who has been loosed from the prison of death and Hades, enters the disciples' fright-barred prison, tells them of their mission which was first of all his own from the Father, and then breathes out upon them the Holy Spirit. Jesus then makes the charge more specific. The disciples are to do the work of "letting go" (*aphiemi*) or "keeping in custody" (*krateo*). The English translation is to forgive or retain sins. The verbs are different from those in Matthew's "keys of the kingdom" saying (*luo* and *deo*; cf. Matthew 16:19), but the image is the same. Sins make a prison, but God, in Christ, breaks into prison and gives freedom to those held captive.

The spirit by which the disciples are to do their own work of prison-crashing is the same spirit breathed first of all into the human being according to the Genesis creation story (cf. John 20:22 and the LXX of Genesis 2:7). It is God's breath, God's own life. But for John, there is also a close connection of the spirit to forgiveness. John's passion narrative has been carefully constructed so that its chronology coincides with the events of preparation for Passover and then the Passover

itself. Jesus is anointed for burial six days before the Passover, even as the Passover lamb was to be selected on that day (cf. Exodus 12:3); he is crucified at Noon on the Day of Preparation (cf. John 19:14-16); when he dies his blood runs freely and he has no broken bones, even as the Passover regulations require (cf. John 19:36 and Exodus 12:46). Thus, the third time Jesus came to Jerusalem for Passover, he served as the lamb of a Passover which was for all peoples (cf. John 12:31-33).

John foreshadowed that outcome already in the Baptist's announcement in 1:29: "Behold the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" The Day of Atonement, not Passover, is associated with taking sin away, but John has brought images of both into his picture of what Jesus' death had accomplished. John gives the Passover clue in the 12:26 citation of Exodus 12:46. Quoting Zechariah 12:10 in the following verse (John 12:37) helps the reader complete the picture. The prophetic quote begins, "And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of compassion and supplication" At the conclusion of the paragraph which begins that way, the prophet announces, "On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness" (Zechariah 13:1).

This completes the picture of the spirit-breath Jesus breathes out upon the disciples in John 20:22. It is the spirit of creation and also of compassion. Compassion is what breaks into prisons and makes them no more able to hold people captive. That sounds like common sense. It is common sense. For sin becomes a prison when people allow some slight, offense, hurt, or betrayal to come between them in such a way that the parties involved can no longer risk genuine, vulnerable humanity with one another. The only solution is for someone finally to take the risk of being wounded once more so that the parties can reconcile, embrace, feel again each other's warm flesh and taste each other's tears. Common sense, yes. But so difficult to do. As a result, the world is filled with prison cells of every kind, each overcrowded with people miserable in their loneliness.

The creating, compassionate spirit of Christ which is breathed upon the Christian community in baptism gives the courage, so difficult to summon up in oneself, to risk vulnerability in genuine, reconciling compassion. When the spirited one comes crashing into the prison, she or he brings healing, cleanness, peace. Try it. Step between the bars, say "*Shalom*," and show the holes in your hands and in your heart. You may not break down all the bars at once, but you'll have at least one cell-mate with whom you can drink the Passover cup and share the story of freedom.

The Third Sunday of Easter

1. Acts 9: 1-20. Paul is caught by the risen Lord on the way to Damascus, struck blind, and given new eyes.

2. Revelation 5:11-14. A vision of the myriads who acclaim as the ruler of all the Lamb who was slain.

3. John 21:1-14. Jesus directs the disciples' work and nurtures them.

The gospel lesson uses the metaphor of the fishing expedition to discuss the mission of the church (cf. Luke 5:1-11). Significantly, working in the food industry as fishermen was the original calling of the disciples mentioned in the story. Peter's statement in 21:2 that he was going fishing has been labeled a form of apostasy by many commentators--as though resuming work as a fisherman was a form of unfaithfulness or disloyalty when compared with some "higher" calling as an ecclesiastical professional. But that line of thought is not at all what John's gospel intended. John really meant to show how the work of the disciple--i.e., any work a disciple did--was transformed in light of the Easter gospel. By means of the disciples' work, God does God's own work of creation and redemption. Nets, shovels, tractors, floppy disks, syringes, test tubes, drafting boards, lathes, dustmops, and taxicabs, even every single Dixon Ticonderoga #2 in the second-grade teacher's desk drawer, is one of God's instruments in the hands of those in whom God's spirit dwells.

In the lesson, the work which Peter and the others do is called "hauling" in the English text. Significantly, that is the same verb (*helko*) as that in the statement of

Jesus in John 12:32 that when he was lifted up from the earth he would "draw" all people to himself. Jesus did draw all people, represented by his mother and his beloved disciple, together at the foot of his cross, but now that he has ascended beyond the bounds of space and time (cf. John 20:17), that work of drawing to himself takes place by means of the work which the community members do as they go about their various callings in the world. The baptized see their various vocations as opportunities to serve others with care and compassion.

One obvious message of the pericope seems to be that the mission of the community carried out in Christ's name will accomplish nothing unless the risen Lord directs it. Only when Jesus instructs the disciples is there a catch, and only when he is there to feed them are they able to draw in their catch. The catch itself is also a significant feature of the pericope. It numbers exactly 153 fish, which, according to Jerome, was the number of species of fish known at that time, and "still the net was not torn (*schizein*)."

That last feature was no doubt John's way of arguing that there was room in the church for everyone--Jews and Gentiles, slave and free. But the possibility exists also that the net which does not tear is one of the marks by which to identify the authentic mission of the risen Lord. Christ's net does not tear. None are lost from Christ's net. Then, if the community gathered in Christ's name breaks or tears, and some are lost, let go, or left behind for the sake of expediency, might we not suspect that this was not really Christ's net? Might we not ask, for example, of certain forms of the so-called "church growth movement" whether their need to leave some out of the net might indicate that the net it uses is not Christ's, but one of its own making?

Our nets do tear, even, it seems, when we have taken every precaution to let Christ direct the mission and nourish us for our task. We inevitably lose some of the fish and we know the pain of schism. Are we inauthentic disciples? Is the blood of those who are lost on our hands? Comfort in the face of these questions is found in the observation that Jesus has fish on shore already when the disciples arrive with the catch. It seems he can

gather and catch by other means than by the net we try to haul, and rather than find that a threat to our monopoly, we might well take that as solace in moments when we seem to have lost someone to a break in the net, or if one day it should be one of us who slips out some tear and is lost.

The meal which Jesus serves the workers on the shore at the end of their work is reminiscent of the meal at which he had fed the five thousand with bread and fishes. That meal was for John a foretaste of the messianic banquet, the final banquet at which all the world shall be gathered.

The Fourth Sunday of Easter

1. Acts 13:15-16a, 26-33. Paul preaches of Jesus' resurrection in a synagogue of Antioch.

2. Revelation 7:9-17. The numberless throng gathers to praise the Lamb.

3. John 10:22-30. Jesus speaks of his identity by pointing to his followers and his Father.

In this week's gospel lesson the metaphor for mission and ministry is shepherding rather than fishing, but at least one part of the message is the same as that in the Easter 3 lesson. None that have been gathered will be lost. No one can snatch a single sheep from the hand of this shepherd who will give his life for the sheep.

Coming where it does in John's gospel, this pericope plays a role analogous to the synoptics' story of Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8:27-33 and parallels). Very near the midpoint of the gospel, Jesus' identity as messiah is questioned and discussed, and the certainty of Jesus' death seems insured by what has been spoken, for it is ultimately the crucifixion in all four gospels that defines what it means to be "messiah." In the synoptics, however, Jesus questions those with him about how they understand him, while in John those with him question Jesus about his identity. "Will you keep us in suspense? If you are the messiah, tell us!"

Jesus responds indirectly. His works are the answer. He has healed and he has fed. But most important at the moment seems to be this sign of his mission, that he demonstrates a faithfulness as strong as God's own faithfulness toward those of his flock. Not a one will be lost. That is perhaps the truest mark of the messiah--faithfulness to the point of sacrifice. This shepherd-messiah is not a hireling (cf. 10:12) who would save his or her own life first if forced to choose between survival and losing a few of the sheep. The good shepherd would die before giving up a single one of the flock.

That message is good news to those of the flock who may fear for the strength of their faith. Ultimately, it is more important that God's grip on me is firm than that my hold on God remains strong. For those who would be shepherds, this message is something of a measure of one's service. Once more, the mark of genuine ministry turns out to be not how many are gained, but how many are lost.

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

1. Acts 13:44-52. The Gentiles hear the message of Paul and Barnabas gladly.

2. Revelation 21:1-5. In the new heaven and earth, God will wipe away every tear. There will be no more mourning, for death shall be no more.

3. John 13:31-35. Jesus' new commandment: Love one another as I have loved you.

For this pericope "Maundy Thursday" is named, *Mandatum* Thursday. This is the night of the New Commandment. The Old Commandment was that you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself. The New Commandment is that you love one another as Christ has loved you. How are those different? And why is that commandment necessary now, and not before in John's gospel?

Part of the answer is in the impending new circumstance of Jesus' physical absence from the community of disciples. From now on the disciples will have to play the role of Christ to one another, as he won't have a

regular body any more and they will have to be his body--arms, hands, feet, lips.

But there is another reason perhaps. Someone else will no longer be in the community, for on this night the net was torn, the flock was diminished by one. This is the night commemorated through all the centuries of Christendom as the night when Jesus was betrayed. The pericope begins, "When he [Judas] had gone out" This new commandment is the one by which to live when there is a traitor in the community. We must decide how much to give in to our suspicions. And if we find out who it is, we must decide whether to cut our losses and let that one go, forever lost and unforgiven, or whether to find some other way to live.

This commandment and this night are different because no one in the community really knows who might be the next traitor. Each must ask, "Is it I?" Any one of them could be a traitor. And can you love a traitor? Could you love yourself, forgive yourself, if you were a traitor? The point is that we love others and forgive them only as much and as far as we are able to love and forgive ourselves. Mostly, we don't do those very well, and we do worse where there is lots to forgive, much to love in spite of. Each of us knows what a despicable traitor lives within our own skin. Thus, on this night it is time to love not only as well as we are able to love ourselves, but it is time to love as Christ loved us and gave himself for us. Such a love will be the mark of this community, that by which all people will know whose disciples its members are (13:35).

Where do we get the ability to do that kind of loving? In John's thought that capacity for love and forgiveness is given to the community, as Christ has blown his spirit into the community (20:22-23) so that they can do the hard work of forgiveness. And whoever eats and drinks the flesh and blood of the Son of Man, in that one Christ abides (6:56). The Christ who abides in the eucharistic community is the same Christ who knew that there was a traitor in his circle, according to John (6:70-71), but who did not single that one out and presumably loved him along with the others all the way to the garden across the Kidron (18:1-11), where Jesus meets Judas one last time and forestalls his kiss by turning himself in.

The Sixth Sunday of Easter

1. *Acts 14:8-18. Paul heals a crippled man and is mistaken for a god.*

2. *Revelation 21:10-14, 22-23. The new Jerusalem needs no temple or heavenly lights, for the Almighty and the Lamb dwell there.*

3. *John 14:23-29. Jesus promises the Counselor, the Holy Spirit who will teach all things and bring to remembrance Jesus' words, so that the disciples might have the peace which the world cannot give.*

In this gospel lesson, Jesus prepares his disciples, and John his readers, for a life of discipleship in his apparent absence. For John's audience, the problem of the delayed return of Jesus was very nearly a past concern. The problem now was finding resources for sustaining long-term discipleship in a mostly hostile world.

The challenge facing the disciples then and the disciples now is to love Christ faithfully by keeping his word (14:23). That word consists at the very least of the new commandment, to love one another as Christ has loved them (13:34). But it will also turn out to include the ongoing work of Christ's own world-encompassing mission. "As the Father sent me, so I send you," is Jesus' commission to the community after his resurrection (20:21), and what the Father had sent Jesus for was that the world not be condemned, but saved instead (3:17). Such was the long-term task, saving by loving a world which seemed not to want either loving or saving.

The world has its own kind of saving, its own kind of peace. Capitalist peace, communist peace, junta peace and apartheid peace are really all versions of the world's peace which Jesus and John knew--the *Pax Romana*. And such peace still works as it always has. You must do things as the people with the money and weapons say to do, or else. Or else what? Or else we nuke you, that's what! Individuals make the same peace in their homes when they learn each other's weaknesses well enough to use them and play on them, and know just which buttons to push to blow things sky high. Most of the peace in the world and a good part of it in our homes is not really peace but only

the silence of fear, the quiet of despair over things ever being any different.

And the disciples are to change all that? Their hearts are troubled. The task is too great, their strength and wisdom is too little. They know that Christ's peace is the opposite of the world's. Christ's peace comes through forgiveness of sins and by the love which strengthens others in their weakness. Anyone who has ever loved and forgiven knows that those can hurt. They can tear and trouble us. Hence, Jesus' statement, "Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid" (14:27), has an odd, "easy-for-you-to-say" ring to it.

Indeed, the peace which God gives, and by which he would bring healing peace to the world, has a kind of troubling restlessness to it. Disciples will always have some trouble, some holy restlessness in their hearts, for they cannot rest so long as there are people in the world whose only peace comes from fear. In fact, the only way it can be said that the disciples' hearts are not troubled is when they find that it is not their own heart any longer, but Christ's, which beats in them. Christ's heart was and is a troubled heart. The way John tells the story, Jesus' heart was often troubled: when Lazarus died (11:33), when he realized that his "hour" had come (12:27), when he learned of Judas' plans (13:21). But even as the waters of Bethzatha healed only when they were troubled (John 5:7), so also in Jesus' being troubled there was always a healing worked, life restored, *shalom* given.

Christ's troubled heart he gives to the disciples. It is given in baptism. It is sustained in the meal of his body and blood. The disciples go on their mission stirred up with holy restlessness, to take to the world *shalom*. And so that they know what to say to themselves and to others, so that the peace they bring is truly Christ's and not merely more of the world's kind, the Father sends the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, who will teach them all things, and bring to their remembrance all that Christ has taught them of his love and peace.

So disciples don't really go on their mission alone after all. At the very least, when they sit down at a

meeting, face a homeless crowd of poor folks in their misery, get off the plane to begin some new work, visit a hospital room, or sit down at the family dinner table, the disciples will be greeted by the welcoming committee of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. That's not a bad way to begin.

The Seventh Sunday of Easter

1. Acts 16:6-10. Paul responds to the call, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."

2. Revelation 22:12-17, 20. The promise of the risen Christ: "Surely I am coming soon!"

3. John 17:20-26. Jesus prays for the unity of the disciples and of all who come to believe in him through their preaching.

The so-called "High Priestly Prayer" of Jesus in John 17 is a favorite text today among those who care for the health and vitality of the ecumenical movement. Those of us who cherish unity in diversity can only find it a bit unsettling to learn that in all probability, the prayer in John 17 was prayed in the Johannine community *against* other Christians, some of whom had christologies and other teachings which the author of John meant to oppose. Hence, this gospel lesson presents the modern interpreter and preacher with a problem inherent in the use of most portions of the New Testament. Since most items kept in the Christian canon came originally from communities experiencing persecution and/or controversy, each gospel or epistle in its own way divides up the world into insiders and outsiders, friends and enemies, the God-saved and the God-damned. John's gospel is no exception. John plays hardball when it comes to polarizing good guys and bad guys.

So what does the modern preacher do with this text? Perhaps a useful beginning is made in observing that this gospel lesson is the paragraph of the longer prayer in which Christ prays quite specifically for us, the latter day disciples. We are among those who have believed through the preaching of the first disciples and those who followed them (17:20). The prayer is that we today might be one, even as Christ and the Father are one (17:21).

Obviously, the nature of the unity is what needs defining here. Later Chalcedonian Christianity would interpret the unity of Christ and the Father as a kind of ontic oneness, a unity of being. John's much-debated christology may have tended more in that direction than the implicit christologies of any other canonical gospel, but even for John it is dynamic rather than ontic unity which most clearly characterizes the unity of the Christ and the Father. Twice in this concluding paragraph of John 17 the unity of the community, Christ, and the Father is described as having to do with sacrificial love (*agape* cf. 17:23 and 26). Christ has loved the disciples even as the Father has loved him, and thus when the disciples live out *agape* the world sees the Father in action. This is a notion taken straight from the scriptures John loved so much. In Exodus 4:16 God speaks to Moses concerning Aaron: "He shall speak for you to the people; and he shall be a mouth for you, and you shall be to him as God." Again, Exodus 7:1-2: "See, I make you as God to Pharaoh; and Aaron your brother shall be your prophet. You shall speak all that I command you."

Ultimately, therefore, the prayer is that disciples of every subsequent age would have whatever resources it takes to live out God's sacrificial love consistently enough so that the world could see the Father, and the Christ whom he sent, at work in their behavior. What resources are there for those who would attempt such a monumental task, to be as God for the world?

First, there is this prayer itself. This is only the conclusion of the long prayer which is first of all a version of the *Abba*-prayer which Jesus prays for himself and then for his disciples of every age. (Note the echo of Our Father petitions in 12:27; 17:1-2; 17:15.) That prayer asks for God's ultimate, saving self-revelation, and if not only the disciple, but Christ himself is praying for that to take place through the medium of the disciples' agapic behavior, there is encouragement that such a hope might come to fruition.

The *Abba*-prayer is meant to be before anything else a remembrance of baptism and a reclaiming of its promises (cf., e.g., the understanding of Mark's gospel, linking sonship in 1:9-11 and 14:34-35). The promise is that the

baptized individual and community are indeed those in whom God's work of blessing will be seen in the world. God will see to it. God's word does not return empty.

But our communities remain broken. The world has its outposts in this community, in our homes, in our own flesh and blood. We suffer the sickening pain of brokenness and schism, and we create with that disunity a scandal which keeps the world from seeing God, or at least from seeing God at work in our lives. The Johannine author and community knew such divisions and pain, too. In today's second lesson the Johannine author gives vent to sentiments which all who have played "Us vs. Them" know all too well: "Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters, and every one who loves and practices falsehood" (Revelation 22:14-15). We can only hope that the ancient author, and we modern disciples in turn, stopped eventually to recall that also on the inside, among those with washed robes, are those who love and practice falsehood, those who are dogs because they dehumanize themselves and consequently do the same to others, those who murder with their words if not their hands, those who make idols out of anything handy. In recent months the television cameras have poked beneath the robes of the TV species of polarizing insiders and discovered fornicators and thieves inside those robes. We laugh at them--but nervously, if we are thoughtful. We remember the words at the supper. "One of you will betray me." And we really ought to ask, "Is it I, Lord?"

And what if it is, or turns out to be? That's what the robes are for. God finds a way to keep our robes cleaned up, daily washing them, breathing God's spirit once more into the feeble creature inside it, in hopes that in that baptized one, the world--the world inside the community as well as the world outside the community--might see the Father. At our supper then, let us not think as we eat and drink together about whatever dreadful stories the robes hide. Let us look at one another's faces as the visage in which the Father has come clothed this day.