

Series B

The Resurrection of Our Lord

1. *Isaiah 25:6-9. The Lord will make a feast for all peoples on the holy mountain.*

2. *1 Corinthians 15:19-28. Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.*

3. *Mark 16:1-8. Jesus has risen. You will see him as he promised you.*

Mark's curious ending seems a mystery of sorts and has earned his gospel a reputation as somehow defective in comparison to the others. What kind of way is that to conclude a gospel, with the women running away afraid, saying nothing to anyone? We are left hanging with too many questions. Did the women eventually tell their story? Did they ever find Jesus? If Jesus is risen, where is he now and what is he doing?

Mark's rationale for this ending has to do with his audience. They are a persecuted audience who, like the women, are living--and dying--without an appearance (or return) of Jesus to vindicate their faith. All they can do is to keep telling the story as Mark has told it, namely, as the story of one whose baptismal identity had to be kept secret and who eventually found a way to die faithfully when the identity became known. That faithful death brought the centurion's confession. Jesus' story was the reader's story, at least potentially. Jesus has gone ahead of us, walked our path, given us both a model and resources for faithful *martyria*.

Where is Jesus, and what is he doing? He has gone ahead to Galilee. All right, but what about in 64 C.E., or 1988? Mark answers with the story of the transfiguration (9:2-13), the story which is not to be told until the son of man has risen from the dead (9:9). Jesus has been seen in the company of Moses and Elijah, who, according to popular belief of the day, were with God and served as teacher and protector of God's people.

But there is another character in the story besides the risen Jesus and the frightened women--the "young man." Who is he? An angel? Mark? There is another "young man" (*neaniskos*) in Mark, the one who fled away naked from Gethsemane, leaving behind his only garment, a *sindon*, or burial garment. Mark's readers could scarcely have missed seeing how much they were like that young fellow. Most of them had been dressed in burial garments on the night before the Day of Easter, then stripped of that garment, baptized, crucified with Christ, born again, and raised to a new life. In the morning they had appeared to the congregation, dressed in a new, white garment, to witness to the resurrection of Jesus. Whoever he was, he was one of them, or they were now like him. Somehow they were new, different, reborn.

That includes the women who ran away. They had died on Friday, watching the end of the one to whom they had given their hearts. The burying they came to complete on Sunday turned out to be their own, not Jesus'. What they left behind as they fled were their old selves, the selves who knew *only* grief and fear as responses to death. Even in their trembling and astonishment, they were on their way to where they would be the body of Christ in the world.

We have played the women's role, and most of us quite often by now, burying those to whom we have given our hearts, and each time burying part of ourselves as well. But we have also been buried with Christ, drowned in the baptismal waters, so that even in our trembling and astonishment it is not we who live, but Christ. We are the body of Christ. There are no corpses here. We are risen. We are risen indeed. Alleluia!

Second Sunday of Easter

1. Acts 3:13-15, 17-26. Peter uses scripture to preach Christ crucified and risen.

2. I John 5:1-6. All who believe Jesus is the Christ are children of God.

3. John 20:19-31. The risen Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit on the disciples, charges them to forgive sins, and shows himself to Thomas.

The gospel lesson is the same for all three lectionary cycles, but it has sufficient themes for a variety of homiletical approaches. In the first scene, the risen Jesus comes into the frightened huddle of disciples and presents his wounds as proof that his death had indeed succeeded. His side wound, unique to John's gospel, is the proof that he was indeed the Passover lamb, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (cf. 1:29, 35 and 19:31-37). Jesus then commissions the disciples to do as he has done and empowers them by his spirit to loose people from the power of sin. This paragraph begins to answer the question concerning the location and activity of the risen Jesus. The spirit of Christ takes on flesh in the ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation, a ministry already fulfilled in the moment Jesus cried out, "It is finished!"

Thomas plays the role of John's reader, that is, any one who was not there to see so that he or she might believe, and must instead believe without seeing. John has shown throughout his gospel, most notably in chapters 9 and 11, that seeing does not necessarily produce faith, nor are sight and faith the same thing. *Credo* means "I give my heart" and the Anglo-Saxon means the same as the German *belieben*, "to hold dear," perhaps even "to fall in love." That is why it is the wounds which once more turn unbelief to belief. The gift given in death, as signified in the wounded hands and side, not the dazzling glory of resurrection, are what brings the confession, "My Lord and my God!" Belief does not cling to propositions, but to personal relationships.

The wounds are still quite touchable in today's world. Wherever there are disciples in whom the spirit of Christ has taken up flesh and blood, there are wounds which are the signs of the love lived most completely on the cross. In the community of the wounded *shalom*-sayers and *shalom*-doers it is still possible to touch the wounds in the hands and side of the lamb of God, the crucified, and to share in the body and blood, thus becoming part of the one bloodied body which takes away the sin of the world.

Third Sunday of Easter

1. *Acts 4:8-12. A crippled man is healed by the name of the crucified and risen Jesus.*

2. *I John 1:1-2:2. That which we have heard about we have now seen.*

3. *Luke 24:36-49. Jesus appears to the disciples, shows he is yet flesh and blood, opens the scriptures, and urges the spread of the gospel.*

It is difficult to resist suggesting "You Are What You Eat" or "I Eat, Therefore I Am," as titles for a sermon or homily on this Sunday's gospel lesson. The lesson advances several Lukan themes which are not directly related to the eating theme, such as the way to read the scriptures and the importance of Jerusalem as the point from which the mission of the disciples is to begin, but the picture of Jesus eating a piece of fish in front of the disciples offers the most promising possibilities for preaching.

Commentators generally agree that Luke was working to resist the emerging, hellenistic christology which eventually earned the name "docetism." Even after the resurrection, Jesus is not a ghost or spirit, but flesh and blood. The special attention called to the hands and feet probably means that Luke, like John (cf. 20:24-27), understood that the wounds sustained in being crucified were still quite evident. Spirits and ghosts are not punctured and they do not bleed. Neither do they get the munchies in the middle of the night and scarf down whatever snack might be available, in this case a leftover piece of broiled fish. Luke's Jesus was truly and completely a human being, and surely for Luke the resurrection was no metaphor.

The docetism Luke wished to oppose was and is both pervasive and attractive. The closet docetists who live inside most of us want a risen Christ, and certainly a savior, who is mostly God--not real flesh and blood, but a spirit in disguise. The docetist is embarrassed by vulnerable, moribund flesh, and ashamed of how it lives and what it must do to keep living. In the words of Ernest Becker, "At its most elemental level the human organism, like crawling life, has a mouth, digestive tract, an anus,

a skin to keep it intact, and appendages with which to acquire food. Existence, for all organismic life, is a constant struggle to feed--a struggle to incorporate whatever other organisms they can fit into their mouths and press down their gullets without choking. Seen in these stark terms, life on this planet is a gory spectacle, a science-fiction nightmare in which digestive tracts fitted with teeth at one end are tearing away at whatever flesh they can reach, and at the other end are piling up the fuming waste excrement as they move along in search of more flesh." (*Escape from Evil*, p. 1) When we are finished eating, we are finished, and we become food for worms. We are what we eat, flesh and blood. Who would want a human savior who might redeem us in our humanity, when we could have a spirit savior, a god, who could rescue us from our humanity?

Food is also a sign, however, that we are more than merely flesh, for food is also the stuff of rituals by which we make meaning and find identity. We could stuff our mouths with our hands and stay alive. But we choose to sit in orderly groups. A meal has a beginning and a conclusion. It is sacred time. Passover meals, agape feasts, Thanksgiving dinner, even a *Henkersmahlzeit*, all tells us who we are, where we belong, and what the meaning of our lives might be. Sadly, our meals also reveal our foibles and sins. Too many eat in bitter silence, or alone. Too many eat garbage. Some eat too much while others eat not at all.

Luke's resurrection gospel will not allow us to solve our problems by an escape from our humanity. The one who ate with sinners, and died with sinners, has been raised as flesh and blood to affirm and redeem our own genuine humanity. We are not changed into something else, nor do we need to pretend as much. We are men and women. And by the power of the meal at which we share in the body and blood of Luke's risen Christ, we work every day to resist those things which demean the flesh and blood God has created. We work against hunger which kills; against shaming our bodies or trashing them as though they were cheap; against meals served up in bitterness.

The "We Are What We Eat" theme also points us to another meal, to the supper of Christ's body and blood. If we eat and drink this meal we become what he is: flesh and blood to be sure, and crucified, but risen to a new life.

(If anyone would like to push the notion of the resurrection of the body as flesh and blood to its logical conclusion, John Updike's "Seven Stanzas at Easter" might be a useful piece. A few lines: "Make no mistake: if He rose at all / it was as His body; / if the cells' dissolution did not reverse, the molecules / reknit, the amino acids rekindle, / the church will fall.")

Fourth Sunday of Easter

1. Acts 4:23-33. The apostles pray for boldness to proclaim the resurrection of Jesus.

2. I John 3:1-2. The world does not recognize God's children because it does not recognize God.

3. John 10:11-18. Jesus is the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep.

Several ways to open up this gospel suggest themselves. One might first take up the shepherd image and probe the distinction the text makes between the good shepherd and the hireling. The owner of the sheep, it seems, will risk or even give his life for the sheep, while the other flees at the first sign of danger, leaving the sheep to scatter and to fall prey to wolves.

Jesus' contemporaries, and perhaps John's, would have heard that kind of talk as political. The "shepherd" in the Hebrew scriptures was the king. Ezekiel, for example, excoriates the reckless shepherds who fleeced the flock and were responsible for the exile, and he promises that God will come personally to do the shepherding (Ezekiel 34). It might be fun in an election year to probe the question of how to tell the good shepherds from the self-serving ones. How does one learn whom to trust?

The term "pastor" invites us to apply the image to our spiritual leaders, and once again this year we have ample reason to be suspicious of the shepherding going on

amongst God's people, the church. The only thing more astonishing that the shameless self-serving which has been exposed in the recent televangelism scandals is the apparently irresistible urge on the part of so many people to follow those kinds of shepherds. In at least one instance, the economy of Baton Rouge has proven to be much more important a consideration than what kind of pastoring is done. It is plainly not an easy thing to know which shepherds one ought to trust. Nevertheless, there is a great need to trust them, for our leaders are our hedge against chaos. If we cannot trust them, then whom can we trust?

The most unmistakable characteristic of a trustworthy leader, John's gospel suggests, is the spirit of sacrifice. That is bad politics, whether in the church or in the capitol, but it is the mark of life-giving leadership.

Life-giving? What life is given by the good shepherd? If he gives his life for the sheep, are not the sheep then in the same predicament as the sheep who have been abandoned by the hireling? Aren't both left to face the wolf without a shepherd to protect them? What makes the existence of the good shepherd's flock a "life more abundant," or a "life overflowing?" (John 10:10) If nothing else, the flock of the good shepherd has not learned to respond to evil by fleeing. The flock has learned instead to face evil. Moreover, this shepherd has breathed his own spirit into the flock (John 20:21-23), so they neither flee nor scatter in the face of evil.

This means that the flock of the good shepherd is not preserved from all evil, protected in the blessed isolation of the sheepfold. Sheep are not pets. They live in order to be sacrificed, to be given away for the sake of love, and that is what makes the lives of the good shepherd's sheep "more abundant." Their lives have a purpose beyond running from all which frightens.

John's gospel is very much interested in the voluntary nature of the good shepherd's, and the flock's, sacrifice. That is the burden of the last part of the gospel lesson for Easter 4. Jesus' claim that no one takes his life from him, but he lays it down of his own accord, is the programmatic statement upon which much in John's passion

narrative is built. In John, and only John, Jesus controls Judas' behavior (13:27), turns himself over to the authorities before Judas can betray him (18:4-5), tells the arresting party whom they can take and whom they cannot (18:8), and takes over every trial scene so that others end up answering his questions (18:19-24, 33-38; 19:8-11). He carries his own cross (19:17), dies with a cry of victory on his lips and even chooses the moment of his own death (19:30). This was no tragic martyr. This was a willing sacrifice. The spirit of that one dwells now in the members of the flock and in the flock as a whole. His lifeblood empowers their bodies and strengthens their hearts. The flock can face evil as steadfastly and as willingly as he, no matter the cost. The flock also lives with the promise that the good shepherd, and his Father, never, ever lose one of the sheep. Even death cannot separate them.

Fifth Sunday of Easter

- 1. Acts 8:26-40. Philip baptizes the Ethiopian eunuch.*
- 2. I John 3:18-24. Let us love not in word or speech, but in deed and truth.*
- 3. John 15:1-8. Jesus is the vine from whom we, as branches, draw our life.*

Whenever the people of God have experienced schism, there has always followed very soon the question of which party is the true people of God. The question arose when Solomon's kingdom split into Israel and Judah. Which was the true Israel, the one with the temple and the ark, or the one up north, where the zealous, conservative Yahweh-worshippers had resented and finally rebelled against the way Solomon had turned Jerusalem into a pluralistic, ancient version of Hollywood? The Elohist source of Pentateuchal traditions sought to give the answer: Whoever fears God and does not take God for granted is the true Israel.

John's gospel was written in the aftermath of such a schism, the one which separated the church and the synagogue in the early second century. Today's gospel lesson is, among other things, an attempt to say which group is the true Israel. "I am the true vine," says Jesus in the

first verse. The Jewish reader could hardly miss the point, for the vine was Israel, whom God had brought out of Egypt and planted in the new and good land which God had readied by driving out the former inhabitants (cf., e.g., Psalm 80:8ff., or Isaiah 5:1-7). The early church came to think of itself as the new Israel, the true Israel. But how can you tell? The answer provided by this gospel lesson is a familiar one. By their fruits you shall know them. Look what the vine produces. That's the ultimate test.

It is difficult to know how to handle today the ancient church's boast of being the "new, true Israel." In the heat of the debate of the first and second centuries, such talk has enough intelligible context to make it tolerable. Today, however, it is plainly anti-Judaic. What shall we do, then, with today's gospel?

Perhaps it is healthy for the church to be engaged in self-examination, i.e., doing a vineyard inspection, checking to see what it is producing, not to see whether itself or Judaism is really the true people of God, but merely to get a measure of its own authenticity, to do a root-check. Are we producing what the vineyard owner hoped to get? Or have we been producing "stinking things" (cf. the Hebrew of Isaiah 5:2)?

What did the planter and owner of the vineyard hope to receive from the vine? Supposedly, God had chosen a people to be his agents of blessing in the world, and all the families of the earth were to eat from the sweet fruits of the vine (Genesis 12:1-3). This was a response to the curse under which the world had fallen. This can also be put much more into liturgical language. John 6 has obvious eucharistic imagery, and there Jesus is the "bread of life." Here in John 15 some have seen the cup imagery to accompany the bread of John 6. The vine produces grapes, for wine, for the cup. What God really wants to get underway is the great celebration, the feast, the eschatological banquet.

But the great party is not only for the end of time, nor is it celebrated in the here and now only in the liturgical, eucharistic setting. It occurs among us at the tables in our homes, where our meals are eaten in joy,

not in bitterness; where all are welcome, not only the ones who have not wronged us today; where there is kindness and thanksgiving spoken.

Though some of our meals may fall under the shadow of a curse, and some may not seem a sharing of blessing, the vine yet belongs to God, who prunes and digs and fertilizes. God has grafted us into the one vine by means of Jesus Christ, and through him we receive into ourselves as branches the lifegiving sap which will produce the fruit God intends to spread to all the families of the earth as his last hope for the world. (It is hard to resist noting that even the eunuch in today's first lesson can bear fruit as a branch of this particular vine!)

Sixth Sunday of Easter

1. Acts 11:19-30. The news concerning Jesus spreads to Antioch.

2. I John 4:1-11. The true Spirit of God is known by the confession that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.

3. John 15:9-17. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

This gospel lesson, which is a continuation of the previous week's, is first of all the picture of the fruitful vine at work. When the sap is flowing, and the vine is healthy, the wine tastes of the purest love. There is no *agape* greater than that which actually results in laying down one's life for another, as Jesus was about to do at this point in John's gospel.

The central notion in the text is the new commandment which Jesus has first stated in this long discourse at the moment when Judas left the room (cf. 13:31-35): "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (15:12). Earlier Jesus had called it a new commandment. The old one was to love your neighbor as yourself. In an era of bitter in-fighting and the fear of being betrayed to persecuting outsiders, that old commandment was not enough any longer. It is difficult to find *shalom*, wholeness, and healthy self-love when fighting bitterly, or when you realize that you, too, could be

capable of weakness, meanness, and treachery. Hence, to love others only as much as we can love ourselves is not enough.

Love as I have loved, Jesus says. That is, love with the sacrificial love which is demonstrated on the cross. But where do fighters and potential traitors find the capacity for that kind of love toward others, when they can scarcely love themselves?

Ask the Father for such power; he has promised to give it (v. 16). Indeed, whatever you ask in this area, the Father grants. You are his vine. He intends to produce fruit, and he intends to do it through you. The power to love in this new way is a gift, not something you must cultivate strictly on your own. That sounds like such idealism in some ways, and yet it is a simple, observable phenomenon. There is nothing so empowering in human experience as being the recipient of pure, voluntary, sacrificial love. It is humbling, sometimes unnerving, strangely invigorating, and it produces fruit all over the place. The community of faith lives on such acts, beginning with the action of the one who first loved us. In this community of Christ's friends, for whom life has been given, and to whom life is given in the bread and cup, sacrificial love, which began with and somehow always is the love of Christ, is what ferments the grapes from the vine to make it the wine of the end-time feast.

Seventh Sunday of Easter

1. Acts 1:15-26. Matthias is chosen to fill Judas' vacant place among the apostles.

2. I John 4:13-21. God has given his Spirit that we might confess Christ and live with one another in love. Love casts out fear.

3. John 17:11b-19. Jesus prays not that his disciples would be taken out of the world, but that they might be saved from evil.

The "high priestly prayer" of Jesus in John 17 is, among other things, a part of John's midrashic commentary on the Our Father, the prayer which the newly baptized learned in the days after Easter in the early church. The

specific petition of the prayer which today's gospel takes up is "Save us in the time of trial," or, in John's words here, "keep them from evil" (v. 15).

The scenario which the prayer assumes is the first-century apocalyptic vision of the severe trial to which the faithful would be subjected in the time immediately prior to the return of Jesus. The petition of the Our Father asks that in the time of that trial, the believer's authenticity will be evident and that Satan, the prosecuting attorney, will not be able to persuade either the believer or God that this one is not really God's child.

John's second-century readers likely did not expect any longer the imminent return of Jesus, but they certainly knew trials which, though perhaps not obviously eschatological, were surely difficult and dreadful. John's audience also knew that sometimes someone failed, or seemed to fail, and became lost. Members of the community broke ranks, broke confidences, broke down under trial of persecution and internal struggles. It made one wonder if that could happen to anyone. If John's readers knew any of the other canonical gospels, they surely knew that Jesus had warned the disciples that indeed anyone could fall victim to the trial. Hence, they should all watch, and pray (cf. Mark 14:32-42 and parallels). Indeed, in the context of this discussion in John, there is mention of one who had failed in the time of trial, namely, Judas. In English, verse 12 refers to "the son of perdition." Literally, the Greek says, "the lost one." Here was proof that it can happen, that one can be lost.

Could it happen to me? Might I prove an inauthentic child of God? Don't my actions sometimes suggest that I am a failure, a phony? Or if I am a child of God, why is all this terrible stuff happening to me? Who, and whose, am I, really? Mark and Paul suggest that in such a moment of questioning, one ought to pray the Our Father (Mark 14:32-42 and Romans 8:12-17). When you hear yourself say, "*Abba*, Father," you will be hearing the Spirit's own witness, that "child of God" is your true identity.

John goes a step further for his beleaguered community. The Christian is not the only one praying the *Abba* prayer. Jesus prays it, too, on behalf of the child of God. One

never faces the trial alone, without an advocate, a defense counsel (in Greek: *parakletos*). Here, however, the picture is not the Spirit as defender, but Christ as fellow petitioner.

John's gospel consistently comforts its readers with a version of election theology such as is found in the prayer of John 17. The anonymous disciple whom Jesus loves is the ideal in John, while poor, struggling, hard-working Peter is always the fall guy and the negative model. The point? Ultimately, identity and discipleship both are measured not by what one tries or accomplishes, but by the simple truth that Jesus loved and has chosen one. That is not the word about the nature of discipleship most appropriate in every moment, but in the midst of ultimate trial over identity, that is the good news. God has chosen you, loved you, set you apart in Christ's truth, and will never, ever forsake you. Even should you fall, the Christ who prays this prayer for you will not let your place remain empty at the table. In the end, it is his will and his mission to have all the places filled at the table. Though our own faith has its moments of weakness, he is faithful. He will search you out and find you. He will never forget you, no matter how lost you may have been or may become.

That this discourse in John takes place at a table where one place is now empty is the best link to the sacrament. The meal we share in the here and now will always have its empty places, and that is one of the reasons why this meal is but a foretaste of the final supper and not the final supper itself. There is yet more searching to be done, and more praying. The body and lifeblood we take into ourselves at this meal make us one with the high priest who prays this prayer, and it empowers us to be among the searchers for the lost ones, as well as members of the defense counsel team in the trial which is conducted at every moment of the day and night. One day, all the places at the table will be filled.