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Fourth Sunday of Easter

Thomas Gumbleton | May. 7, 2009 The Peace Pulpit

As we try to listen deeply to God's word now during this liturgy, I think it's important to remind ourselves of what is happening during these weeks of Easter. We don't say it's the fourth Sunday after Easter; it's the fourth Sunday of Easter -- we're beginning the fourth week of the Easter time, the time of the risen Jesus. During this time, what the liturgy guides us in doing is trying to hear how the disciples came to understand Jesus. Think back to Easter Sunday, and if you remember, we listened to the gospel of Mark, and that gospel is rather unusual in the way it ends, because it's a very abrupt ending.

Jesus has been tortured and executed, and then on Sunday morning, some of the women go to the tomb to anoint his body. The tomb is empty and they become confused. They're supposed to go back and tell the other disciples, but they are afraid, they run away, everything's in disarray and the gospel ends right there. Not a very comforting or very good ending; it's too abrupt. But that's almost certainly the way it was. Nobody saw Jesus rise from the dead, so when they discovered that tomb was empty, they were upset, afraid, confused and it didn't become clear to them immediately, but gradually, over a period of time as they began to experience Jesus alive in their midst, they really experienced that.

Today's Readings
Acts 4:8-12
Psalm 118:8-9, 21-23, 26, 28, 29
1 John 3:1-2
John 10:11-18
Full text of the readings [1]

This is what is supposed to happen in our own lives, that we experience the living Jesus in our midst. It took quite a long time for that community of disciples of Jesus (which we call the church), to sort all of this out and to remember all the different ways in which they experienced Jesus present to them. It was only much later that these incidents where they had that intense experience of Jesus, that they wrote it down and described for others what it was. Today, in the gospel of John, which was written toward the end of the first century, four or five decades after Jesus had died and risen from the dead, and by this time, it's become more and more clear how Jesus is in their midst, how they have experienced him.

So today, in the gospel here, how Jesus is described as that good shepherd, that shepherd doesn't perhaps mean a lot to us -- we don't care for sheep, we don't know much about it -- but at the time of Jesus, that was a very important role. The good shepherd was one who really knew every one of his sheep. They knew him and they would follow him. The good shepherd, as Jesus is described as speaking about it, is the one who is ready to lay down his life for his sheep and obviously it becomes clear that this is what Jesus did for us.

As he says in the gospel today, 'I lay down freely. I didn't have to be, but I chose to die in such a way that I could be the way, the truth and the life.' And it wasn't his dying that suddenly brought us, as we sometimes speak of it, "salvation." He didn't pay a price that enabled us then to be saved as sometimes it's put. No; what was happening, and they began to understand this by the way he died, loving and forgiving those who were putting him to death, loving his enemy, doing good to those who were executing him -- by the way he died, he was showing us what the love of God for us is, and those first disciples began to experience that, to know Jesus

in that total gift of himself for them, for us.

He was alive and they began to experience that presence and they began to understand, he shows us the way. He shows us how we must be ready to respond to violence or to hatred, to those who hurt us. The way to life -- that's what Jesus is showing us and it's the only way. Those first disciples also experienced, as we hear in the first lesson today, how Jesus was a healing and comforting presence in their midst. Peter and John had been on their way to the temple to pray and they encountered this poor person, who was in need of healing.

Peter said (you may remember this because it's so easy to remember), 'Silver and gold, I don't have any of that, but what I do have, I give to you in the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Be healed.' So they experienced Jesus and the power of healing that he had. It was all in that name of Jesus that they could be healed. 'There is no other name,' Peter says, 'under heaven in which we are to be healed or saved.' And again, it isn't because he pays a price; it's because he shows us the way. In that lesson though, there's also, I think, kind of a warning to us.

Peter was speaking on trial to the religious leaders -- the scribes, the Pharisees, the Sanhedrin, those who were the leaders in the Jewish community -- and he was warning them, 'You have rejected Jesus Christ. You put him to death, and now he's risen from the dead and he shows us that he is the cornerstone, which you rejected.' That's a phrase out of Psalm 118 and it was a phrase that now they apply to Jesus: 'The stone rejected by the builders has now become the cornerstone,' the one on which the whole temple of the community of disciples is to be built. They had rejected Jesus.

The warning for us as we reflect on this is that we too, perhaps don't listen deeply enough to what Jesus says. We don't look at his example carefully enough, so in ways, we reject him. Our whole community can be caught up in this kind of a rejection of Jesus. I came across a little bit of church history, where the author was asking whether or not we, who are the church, have always been faithful to the way of Jesus. The author points out (and this seems shocking), in 1454, Pope Nicholas wrote a decree in which he blessed, in the name of Jesus, the slave trade. Imagine.

In 1668, a theologian at a university wrote that the justification of slavery is a matter of faith, and he quoted in the name of Jesus, the book of Leviticus, the first letter of Peter, the first letter to the Corinthians, and the letter to Philemon. Our church was failing to heed Jesus. Some leaders of the church had rejected him. We can fall into that same pattern. In fact, this author points out that the first real condemnation of slavery by church leaders was in the Vatican Council in 1965. There are many ways in which we have rejected this stone, which is really the cornerstone upon which everything depends.

There's another, I think, quite shocking part of this history. Study Christian church statements on the place and role of women, even the most recent ones, and you will be reminded of what an early church teacher wrote, and the quote is: "Women are the gateway of the devil." We have a terrible teaching about women in our church that even exists up until the present day, where they're rejected from roles of genuine leadership in the church. So we have to be conscious that what Peter said to those first leaders, and what he's saying to us today, is that we must not reject Jesus, this stone, upon which the whole community is built and we must, each of us, individually take upon ourselves the responsibility to listen to the word of Jesus.

As Peter explains, 'Jesus is the way,' Jesus is the healing power, 'in the name of Jesus,' we are healed and made whole, and only in the name of Jesus. So each of us has that responsibility to try to listen deeply, to listen to these times when the first disciples began to witness Jesus alive in their midst, and we have to try to, in our own prayer, open our hearts and listen, find Jesus present and leading us as that good shepherd who is ready to lay down his life out of love, even for those who put him to death.

If we do listen to Jesus and try to follow his way, the way of love, then we too will experience what we heard in our second lesson today, from that letter of the disciple John, 'See what extraordinary love God has for us.' We

are called children of God and we really are. That's what's even more astounding, that we are sons and daughters of God if we listen to Jesus. Then the disciple says, 'Beloved, we are God's children, and what we shall be has not yet been shown, but when Jesus appears again in glory, we know that we shall be like him.' We will have the fullness of life and joy and peace of Jesus, the son of God if we listen to Jesus and follow him.

This homily was given at St. Hilary Parish, Redford, Mich.

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