

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

May 14, 2009 at 10:47am

Fifth Sunday of Easter

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

This is the fifth Sunday of Easter, so now for the fifth time, we hear again and are asked to reflect upon the Easter truth: Jesus is alive. Jesus is alive and he's living in our midst, even at this very moment. That's what we've been hearing Sunday after Sunday. That Easter Sunday itself, the first women who went to the tomb were told, "He is alive, he is risen, he's no longer here." Well, it took those first disciples a long time to really begin to sort all of this out and to accept the reality that Jesus is alive.

And their witness over these five Sundays continues to strengthen our own conviction that Jesus is alive -- the two disciples walking to Emmaus, seeing Jesus when he broke the bread with them, or the disciples on the seashore, when Jesus challenges Peter, "Do you love me?" They again realize he's alive. He's expecting them to respond to him just as they did before. When he appears to Thomas, "Thomas, touch my wounds. See that it is really I."

Today's Readings
Acts 9:26-31
Psalm 22:26-27, 28, 30, 31-32
1 John 3:18-24
John 15:1-8
Full text of the readings

Today, we have once more, an extraordinary example of someone who experiences this truth, Jesus is alive, he's in our midst, and that is St. Paul. It wasn't part of our first reading, but it's a very important part of the message of today. 'As Paul traveled along and was approaching Damascus, a light from the sky suddenly flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' 'Saul asked, 'Who are you, lord?' The voice replied, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city, where you will be told what to do.'

So once more, we have a disciple who experiences very deeply, very vividly, clearly, Jesus is alive and

it's a truth that they have witnessed to in the scriptures. Down through the centuries, our brothers and sisters in Jesus have always witnessed to the same truth -- Jesus is alive, he lives in our midst. We are those witnesses today and it's important that each Sunday, as we celebrate this Easter experience, that we deepen our awareness that Jesus is alive and lives in our midst.

In the gospel lesson today, Jesus himself gives us a very vivid, clear image of what it means that he is alive. 'I am the vine, you are the branches.' We've seen a vine with its branches. We know how that vine and branch share the same life, and so do we share the same life with Jesus. Jesus is alive and he lives in my heart, in my spirit, and how important it is for us at times, to be quiet and move into our inner spirit, touch our own spirit and discover, Jesus is in my heart, in my spirit, Jesus is alive. That's why Jesus reminds of this truth.

He told his first disciples at the Last Supper, he wanted them never to forget that, even though he knew he would be murdered the next day. He knew he would still be alive and he would live within them, and Jesus tells the same thing to us this morning. Of course, the more we begin to recognize the reality of this truth that Jesus is alive, the more we realize how important it is to act on the truth, to be aware that Jesus is alive, and that he continues to guide each of us as an individual, to guide our whole community of disciples, the church.

In fact, when St. Paul had that tremendous experience that Jesus was alive, and he goes back to Jerusalem, he caused a lot of trouble for that early church, those first disciples. They had been gathering together as disciples of Jesus, but also as faithful Jews. They were going to the temple every day. They were carrying out the Jewish law as they understood it. They were Jews for Jesus, but they were Jews.

Suddenly, Paul is coming with a new message: The church has to open up. It has to be aware that Jesus is alive, not only in these Jewish disciples, but Jesus is alive in the world to spread his message everywhere. Paul becomes the great apostle of the Gentiles, going out to all the nations. This brought about tremendous difficulty in the early church. There were many who did not want to accept that Jesus was also alive and present for those who were not Jews.

But because they had this awareness and this deep conviction and experience that Jesus is alive, they knew that it was Jesus guiding the church, so with difficulty, but with determination, they began to change. The church evolved and became a different kind of church. I'm convinced, and I hope you will share this with me, that because Jesus is still alive, he's still present here now in our world, in our midst, in our community of disciples, he's still here to guide us.

Isn't it possible -- in fact, I think it's the reality -- that because we face great difficulties in the world today, Jesus is trying to show us some new ways to be the community of disciples, to open ourselves to new developments within the church. There are so many women who feel called to the priesthood, and we know we need more ministers of the gospel, ministers of the Eucharist. Jesus is alive; isn't it likely that Jesus is telling us, guiding us, 'Open up,' just like those first disciples had to change and understand the church was for everyone?

I think the same message is coming through to us. We need to change, be open, to know that Jesus is alive and guiding the church if we will listen. The same would be true for married priests. Jesus is calling them, married people, to be priests. Why can't we listen, be open to Jesus guiding us even now? The church could become so rich and so fulfilled if we would be willing to listen to the Jesus who lives in our midst.

Also, as we reflect on this reality of Easter that Jesus is alive, there are other ways in which we must respond. Of course, this morning as we watched some of our younger members receive the Eucharist for the first time, we deepen our faith and conviction that Jesus is alive and present in that bread and wine

that we consecrate during the Eucharist, and we know the presence of Jesus in the holy Eucharist. We adore Jesus, reverence Jesus and receive Jesus into our bodies so that we can be transformed into Jesus.

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But also, if we're trying to be alert to Jesus alive and present in our midst, we'll remember what St. John said to us today: 'My one commandment is that you love one another, not just in word, but in action, in deed, in truth,' and that love for one another doesn't just extend to our community. It's a love that has to reach out to the whole world, and especially to the poor, the oppressed. 'When I was hungry, you gave me to eat. When I was thirsty, you gave me to drink. When I was naked, you clothed me. When I was homeless, you sheltered me.'

Jesus is living in all of those people who are poor and oppressed in our world -- an extraordinary number of people. How can we neglect them? Not if we really know the truth that we proclaimed today: Jesus is alive, he's in our midst, he's in our world. He's in all of us. He asks us to carry his love to all our brothers and sisters, wherever they are, and however they need the loving presence of Jesus.

I truly hope that all of us hear deeply, the message of Easter once more today: Jesus is alive, he's in our midst, he's asking us to continue to listen to him, to change, as he guides and directs us. He's asking us to worship him in the holy Eucharist. He's asking us to serve him and our brothers and sisters everywhere. Please listen. Know that Jesus is alive, follow him, love as he has asked us, and share the gift of his life wherever we go.

[Bishop Gumbleton preached this homily at the St. Leo Parish, Detroit, Mich.]

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