



CROSSWAYSINTERNATIONAL
REACH. TEACH. TRANSFORM.

Copyright © 2019 by H. N. Wendt

Crossways International®

Minneapolis, MN 55435 USA

1-800-257-7308

www.crossways.org

The Revised Common Lectionary Notes

April 7, 14, 18, 19, 21, 28, and May 5

by the Rev. Dr. Harry Wendt, founder of Crossways International

April 7, Fifth Sunday in Lent: John 12:1–8

In John 11, we read of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead—a deed that results in the scribes and Pharisees calling a meeting of the Sanhedrin. Those who attend the meeting vote to have Jesus put to death. Jesus now leaves Jerusalem and goes north to Ephraim, no doubt for security reasons.

12:1–3: Jesus eventually returns to Jerusalem six days before the annual Passover celebration. In John, the Passover observance begins on a Friday evening, not on a Thursday evening as in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

The Lazarus miracle, which provoked the Pharisees' hatred, now inspires love from Mary. When Jesus returns to the vicinity of Jerusalem, He (and apparently His disciples) call on Mary, Martha, and Lazarus at their home in Bethany. They invite Him to share a meal with them. Martha busies herself with the practical details of looking after the dinner guests. Lazarus is with Jesus and other guests around the meal table. The table is low to the floor, and the guests do not sit on chairs. They lie on their sides on a U-shaped sofa-like *triclinium* around three sides of the table—with their legs stretched out away from the table. Suddenly, Mary does something remarkable. She anoints Jesus' feet with precious ointment and then wipes them with her hair.

Naturally, Mary loves Jesus dearly, both as a friend and as the One who brought her brother back to life.

But there is a deeper meaning behind her act of devotion. Kings of Israel were anointed with oil by a prophet at the direction of God. The term *Messiah* means “the anointed one.”

A rabbinic maxim says, “Good ointment spreads from the bedroom into the dining room, but a good name spreads from one end of the world to the other.”

12:4–6: Had we witnessed what Mary did, we might have said, “What a beautiful act of love!” However, Judas says, “What a waste!” He is the disciple who “managed” the funds that Jesus and the other disciples needed to buy food and other basic supplies as they moved around the countryside. Like any greedy person, he quickly works out the price of what is obviously valuable ointment. Three hundred denarii! The denarius was a Roman silver coin equal to about a day’s pay for a laborer. Treasurer Judas is not only a thief but also a pious fraud. His objection that the money used to buy this precious fluid should have been given to the poor is nothing but a mask. He uses pious words to cover his disappointment at not being able to get his own hands on that tidy sum of money!

12:7–8: Jesus does not reprimand Judas as we might expect him to do. However, Jesus will eventually expose his greed; see 13:21–30. All Jesus says is, “What Mary has done is right and proper. She is serving Me while she still can.” Jesus was physically present with His friends for but a short time, whereas they always had plenty of opportunities to serve the poor. (The sad truth is that the poor are still very much a part of our world, despite all the advances in technology.) The surprising thing—and Mary probably does not realize the full meaning of her action—is that the King here has been anointed for His death and burial. Jesus is marked as the Messiah who must die. John pictures the cross as Jesus’ throne, and His crucifixion as His coronation.

12:9-11: Lazarus is only just out of the grave, and the Jewish authorities want to see him dead again! His “great crime” is that he is the cause of many more people flocking to Jesus and believing in Him. Blind, fanatical opposition does not care about rights and wrongs, about truth and justice. Little fish like Lazarus must also be removed to get rid of the big fish, Jesus of Nazareth! However, John makes no reference to Lazarus being put to death by the Jerusalem political and religious elite.

April 14, Palm Sunday: Luke 22:14–23:56

Each of the four passion narratives is unique—and profound. Although they share many common details, each contains unique elements. Luke includes the following specific details in his passion narrative:

- Satan enters Judas (22:3), who confers with the chief priests and captains about how he might betray Jesus “in the absence of the multitude” (22:4, 6). They agree to give him money for his services (22:5). Jesus exposes Judas’ betrayal of the Son of Man (22:48).
- The Jewish leaders themselves go out to capture Jesus (22:52). Jesus heals the servant whose ear Peter has cut off (22:51) and is led away to the High Priest’s house (22:54).
- No night trial or discussion is mentioned (22:54), but Jesus is subjected to abuse (22:63–65). The Sanhedrin meets in daylight and charges Jesus with claiming to be the Messiah (22:66–71). The only body in Palestine that can determine whether or not a person is the Messiah is the Jerusalem Sanhedrin, which meet in the Royal Porch of the Jerusalem Temple. Little wonder, then, that the disciples are keen to have Jesus go to Jerusalem. They are sure that the Sanhedrin will proclaim Jesus to be the Messiah and that they will benefit as a result.
- The authorities take Jesus to Pilate and level charges of political insurrection (23:1–5). When Pilate hears that Jesus is from Galilee, he sends Jesus to his political enemy, Herod Antipas, (3:6–12). Herod Antipas, a son of Herod the Great, who is ruling Galilee and Perea.

- When Jesus appears before Herod, the scene represents the climax of earlier accounts of Herod's reaction to Jesus, which shifts from fascination to opposition (9:9; 13:31–33). Herod wants to see a miracle, but all that he sees is a silent prisoner who is the object of violent accusations and mockery. Ironically, the incident creates a friendship between Herod and Pilate (23:12).
- Pilate feels convinced that Jesus is innocent and declares that he will chastise and release Him (23:13–17). However, when the Jews demand the release of Barabbas, Pilate yields (23:18–25).
- Jesus speaks three Words from the cross: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (23:34); "Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (23:43); "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (23:46).
- Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Jerusalem Sanhedrin, buries Jesus as an act of piety. Joseph represents the righteous of Israel, who were seeking the kingdom of God (23:50–53). In doing this, Joseph renders himself ritually unclean and endangers his own life; the Jewish leaders would have been angry with him for providing Jesus with a decent burial.
- Some women prepare to anoint Jesus' body, but they are interrupted by the Sabbath. Jesus is buried, not like a criminal, but with honor, and His followers know the place. When the women return to the tomb to complete the anointing, there is no possibility that they have mistaken the place of burial (23:55–24:3).
- None of the Gospels suggests that the disciples or anyone else expected the events that were to follow the crucifixion. Even though Jesus pointed to His coming resurrection in the passion predictions (Luke 9:18–24; 9:43b–48; 18:31–34; see also Mark 8:31; 9:30–31; 10:32–34), none of the disciples understood what Jesus was saying. When on one occasion they heard Jesus predict His resurrection, they were too afraid to ask what He meant by it (Luke 9:45; see also Mark 9:9–10). In all four Gospels, the resurrection event explodes upon the lives of the disciples in a most unexpected manner.

It is important for God's people to understand that Jesus' crucifixion was His coronation. When humanity did its worst to Him, He did His best for them. Although at the cross Jesus got crucified, Satan got nailed; here note John 12:31; 14:30–31; 16:4b–11 (especially v. 11); 16:33.

In Luke's narrative, Jesus' words from the cross are profound beyond definition; see 23:34, 43, 46. How different is the Kingdom He established from those that earthly powers continue to establish today!

The following two quotations challenge us to ask, "Why are things so different in the life of today's church?"

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what they sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

–Acts 4:32–34

Most early Communion services did not take place in a church at all, but in a home. People began to appear in the early evening with materials for a potluck supper. They are happy and

relaxed; work is over. All are on a level here, men and women. Roman citizens and commoners, slaves and free. Oil lamps are lit. Couches are set. Feet are washed. They have a meal, reclining around a courtyard, or squashed into a room. They share news. Someone produces a musical instrument and they begin to sing. Indeed, they create new songs, snatches of which are to be found in the New Testament, like 'Awake, sleeper, and arise from the dead: Christ shall give you life,' or 'Holy, holy, holy, Lord God almighty, who was and is and is to come.' Meanwhile, someone has brought out the church box that contains their most Christian belongings: some sayings of Jesus, perhaps a letter from an apostle, or communion vessels. Praise is heartfelt. Speaking in tongues might well follow. There could be a prayer for a healing or a specific need of one of the members. Certainly prayer, the reading of an Old Testament scripture, the recitation of a story about Jesus, and some words of encouragement from members of the community, along with joyful singing, would all feature. And as the evening comes to an end, they would tell again the story of Jesus' passion, and break bread and drink wine in remembrance of Him. Every scrap is finished. The prayer that Jesus taught them is recited. They move around and embrace one another with a holy kiss, and then go home. All very simple. No service books. No priests. No altars. Every eye is on the unseen Lord, the bread, the wine, and each other. And then—out into the night, spiritually refueled for the journey of the coming week.

– Paul Stevens and Michael Green (pp. 134–135 of *Living the Story*)

April 18, Maundy Thursday: John 13:1–17

(Vv. 31b–35 will be dealt with for the Fourth Sunday after Easter.)

Matthew, Mark, and Luke refer to the meal in an Upper Room on Maundy Thursday as a Passover Meal. According to John's Gospel, although the meal took place on a Thursday evening, Passover began on the Friday evening following Jesus' crucifixion. John makes no reference to the place where the meal was shared, i. e., "upper room." However, he alone makes reference to Jesus washing the disciples' feet—an event with profound implications. Peter is the only one who speaks words of protest in relation to Jesus' actions.

Vv. 1–5: In John 13–17, Jesus is alone with His disciples, preparing them for the great shock of separation in the near future. As in the entire passion story, Jesus is really the only person who knows what is going on. He is the only one in control of the situation, even though He is the victim of plots against Him. The evangelist emphasizes this fact in these opening verses.

Jesus knows what only He and His Father know—that the hour of suffering and return to glory has arrived; see 12:23, 27, 31; 16:28. He is not gripped with a panic that might cause Him to forget His friends and think only of Himself. No, He loves them to the end—and that in a double sense. He loves them to His own end—His death. But He also loves them perfectly, as no other person could ever love them. Jesus now demonstrates and proves the truth that He expresses in 15:13.

Even Judas who is to betray Him (v. 2) is included in Jesus' great act of love when He takes on the role of a servant and washes His disciples' feet as they recline on couches at the meal table; see 12:3. The Son

to whom the Father has given all authority (12:49; Matthew 28:18) gets down on His knees to do the work of a household slave or servant. *Only Gentile slaves washed feet.*

Vv. 6–11: Twice we read that Jesus knows what the present “hour” means (vv. 1, 3). Peter is at least honest in objecting to his Master washing his feet. But he and the other disciples do not know, as yet, what is happening, or what it means (v. 7). By insisting that He must wash Peter’s feet, Jesus’ actions serve as a parable, as an image of a greater truth. Jesus must wash Peter if Peter is to have a share in what Jesus is about to gain.

Peter misunderstands for a second time. He does not want to miss out on anything, so the Master had better wash Peter’s hands and head as well! Jesus means that it is only after a person has been washed clean of sin that he can enter into the kingdom of God (3:5). This humble act of loving service is a symbol of the greater act of love, Jesus’ death, by which the Lord washes the disciples clean. The disciples are already clean since they have received His forgiveness (15:3), but His death will be the perfect proof of the fact. Only Judas remains unclean.

The small phrase “except for his feet” in v. 10 is possibly a later addition to the text and is meant to show that after a person has been cleansed from sin in his conversion, there is still need for later washing in the form of continual repentance and forgiveness.

Vv. 12–17: The foot washing is a parable in action, pointing to the meaning of Jesus’ death. It is also an example of how Christians are to serve each other. Jesus is Teacher and Lord. He has the right to expect service from His followers; we would expect them to wash His feet! Greatness in God’s Kingdom is found in service. In particular, each Christian ought to wash his brothers’ and sisters’ feet in the sense that he forgives the sins that they have committed against him and seeks only to serve them.

Verse 16 expresses a truth that reflects a Jewish legal institution. A person who was sent by another to carry out a task in his name could act with complete authority as the authorized agent of that person. Thus, a man could authorize his friend to pay debts, to sign contracts, and even to stand in as proxy at his own wedding. Jesus reminds His disciples that they are “sent ones”—the meaning of the Greek word for “apostles.” They are to represent Him fully in the world. But that means that they also are to be servants, like the Lord Himself. That will be their true glory!

In v. 17, Jesus links “being blessed” to knowing Him and demonstrating His servant lifestyle in all that we think, say, and do. How different from the materialistic world’s definition of “being blessed”! (See also Luke 11:28.) Although Leviticus 19:18 commanded the Jewish people not to seek vengeance but to love their neighbor as they love themselves, Jesus commands the disciples to love one another *as He has loved them* (13:15). A higher standard indeed!

Jesus’ actions illustrate the nature of His kingship and the relationship that is to exist among His followers. They belong to a *community* in which they are called to forgive and serve one another. Their love and service among each other is the badge that reveals their identity to the world (13:34–35).

April 19, Good Friday: John 18:1–19:42

The Trial before Annas and Caiaphas

- The term *hour* rings in the background of John's Gospel like a muffled bell (2:4; 7:30; 8:20; 12:23; 12:27; 13:1; 17:1). It tolls *seven* times in anticipation of Jesus' coming hour of glory. Jesus also refers to His *glory*, or to His being glorified, *seven* times (2:11; 8:49–59; 12:16–23; 12:28; 13:31–32; 17:1–5; 17:20–24). Throughout His life, Jesus manifests a glory contrary to human understanding of the word, for He assumes the form of a Servant even to the point of giving away His life on a cross—His finest hour (17:1).
- In John 10:11, Jesus says, “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” John's passion history reflects that thought. Jesus' death is not the result of cruel fate or of plans that go awry. From beginning to end, Jesus takes the initiative. Jesus is the master of His passion at every turn. He virtually calls down death on Himself. He is doing the work His Father sent Him to do (17:4; 19:28–30). It happens because it must happen (12:38; 13:18; 19:24, 28, 36–37). None of it takes Jesus by surprise. John indicates Jesus' foreknowledge of what was to overtake Him with, “Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to Him . . .” (18:4). Jesus goes to the cross voluntarily.
- The Jewish trial (18:12–14, 19–24) is virtually over by the time it begins. No mention is made of formal charges. No witnesses are summoned. No charge of blasphemy is leveled against Jesus. Jesus is questioned only about His disciples and His teaching. He is not mistreated. His judges level no accusations, but attack Him with violent gestures (18:22). Jesus remains calm and dignified throughout. John devotes seven verses to describing Peter's denials (18:15–18, 25–27).
- It is only during the trial before Pilate (18:28–19:16) that the Jewish leaders level charges: “If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you” (18:30). Even then, they do not seek a *trial*; they seek Jesus' *death*. They have made up their minds about Jesus long before they capture Him and hand Him over to Pilate (5:18; 7:1, 25, 30, 44; 8:20, 59; 10:31, 39; 11:53).
- Prior to the trial before Pilate, John mentions the following witnesses who testify for Jesus:
 - John the Baptist (1:6–34; 3:28; 5:32–34)
 - Jesus Himself (3:11, 32, 33; 8:13–18; 18:37)
 - Jesus' works or signs (5:36; 10:25)
 - The Samaritan woman (4:39)
 - God the Father (5:37; 8:18)
 - The Scriptures (5:39)
 - The man born blind (9:1–41)
 - A crowd of people (12:17)
 - The Holy Spirit (15:26)
 - The disciples (15:27)
 - The evangelist (19:35; 21:24)

The Trial before Pilate

In this final confrontation, Pilate represents the non-Jewish world. Although Pilate is supposedly trying Jesus, it is really Pilate who is on trial. The emphasis throughout the dialogues between Jesus and Pilate

is Jesus' Kingship. Jesus informs Pilate that His own people rejected Him because He was the wrong kind of King for them (18:35, 36). Pilate makes one last comment against the Jewish leaders with the superscription he attaches to the cross (19:19). Even though it is intended as mockery, this superscription nonetheless attests to the world that Jesus is indeed King! The Jewish leaders thus finally suffer defeat.

John lists seven scenes in which Pilate moves in and out of the Praetorium—from Jesus to the Jewish leaders and back again.

Scene 1: Pilate is *outside* with the Jewish leaders who demand Jesus' death (18:28–32). They will not enter Pilate's quarters (a *Gentile* location) lest possibly they be contaminated by being in the presence of bread with leaven in it (they are preparing to observe Passover). They ask Pilate to kill Jesus; they seek an *execution*, not a trial.

Scene 2: Pilate is *inside* with Jesus and discusses kingship with Him (18:33–38a). When Pilate asks Jesus why the Jewish leaders are so angry with Him, Jesus responds that He turned out to be the wrong kind of King. He is, after all, a Servant-King who washes feet—the King of Truth. This puzzles Pilate.

Scene 3: Pilate is *outside* with the Jewish leaders, who choose Barabbas rather than Jesus as the one to be freed (18:38b–40). Pilate declares that he can find no crime in Jesus (18:38b); he repeats this in 19:4 and 19:6.

Scene 4: Pilate is *inside* with Jesus when the latter is scourged (19:1–3). Although the treatment given Jesus is designed to mock Him, it nevertheless declares who He is: *The King of the Jews!*

Scene 5: Pilate is *outside* with the Jewish leaders and presents Jesus to them (19:4–8). They reject Jesus, basing their position on an appeal to their sacred writings (19:7). When Pilate hears them say that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, he becomes more afraid than ever. Naturally, Pilate, being a Roman, was ready to believe that gods could show up in human form.

Scene 6: Pilate is *inside* with Jesus and asks Him where He is from. When Jesus refuses to answer Pilate, the latter discusses power with Him (19:9–11). Jesus reminds Pilate that, in the final analysis, Pilate is free to do only what Jesus permits him to do.

Scene 7: Pilate is *outside* with the Jewish leaders and tries to have Jesus released, but finally hands Jesus over to them (19:12–16a). Pilate yields to the Jewish leaders when they threaten to have him thrown out of the exclusive club known as “Friends of the Emperor.” Because Pilate is an imperial procurator—one appointed by the Emperor—he belongs to that club and does not want to lose his membership in it and the privileges that come with it.

Pilate hands Jesus over for crucifixion at *midday* on the Day of Preparation for Passover (19:14)—at that very hour when people began to hand over their lambs for ritual slaughter in preparation for the Passover meal. Hence, Jesus is declared to be the final, one-for-all, once-for-all Passover Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. The Jewish leaders remain adamant in their rejection of Jesus, and ironically declare that Caesar is their king.

Pilate's pathetic, frenzied running to and fro expresses the turmoil in a person's soul when faced with the innocent King and his having to make up his mind about Jesus' identity and ministry. Ironically, it is Pilate, this pagan Roman ruler, who declares that Jesus is King of the Jews and insists that He be called

that right to the bitter end (19:19–22). At the same time, when Pilate presents Jesus to the Jewish leaders as King, they respond with, “We have no king but the emperor” (19:15). What irony! The Jewish leaders despised the Roman emperor! Jews should have no king apart from God!

One detail referred to in scene 7 (above) calls for special comment. According to the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus celebrates a Passover meal with His disciples in the Upper Room (Mark 14:12 and parallels). According to the three Gospel accounts, Jesus is crucified on Passover day itself, for the Jewish day began and ended at sunset. However, in John’s Gospel, Jesus’ last meal with His disciples takes place on the day of *Preparation* for the Passover (13:1; 18:28; 19:14, 31, 42). Both versions agree that the events of the Upper Room took place on a Thursday night, the crucifixion on a Friday, and the resurrection on the following Sunday. The difference lies in *Passover* as opposed to *Preparation for the Passover*. Furthermore, Mark reports that Jesus was crucified at nine in the morning (15:25). John 19:14 says He was *handed over* for crucifixion at *midday*.

Regardless of which timetable is historically correct, John’s emphasis is theological. In John’s opening chapter, Jesus is twice referred to as “the Lamb of God” (1:29, 36). Lambs used in the annual Passover meals were handed over in the Temple beginning at midday on the Day of Preparation—to be ritually slaughtered by the Temple priests in preparation for the Passover meal that evening. John wishes to present Jesus as the perfect, final, universal Passover Lamb who died for the sins of the world. It is with good reason that Jesus’ legs were not broken, (19:33). No bones of a Passover lamb were to be broken in the preparation process (Exodus 12:46). In John, chronology serves theology.

Crucifixion—Coronation

John’s description of Jesus’ journey from Pilate to Calvary is dignified. It is His coronation procession. Jesus is on His way to His enthronement—and the cross is His throne. Jesus will be lifted on to a throne of rough, splintered, blood-stained wood as other royal figures might be lifted on to their more regal thrones. Anything that might detract from the dignity of the journey and the coronation itself is omitted. No reference is made to Simon of Cyrene; Jesus carries His own cross. There is no mockery on the way to Calvary or at Calvary, no commiseration for the weeping women of Jerusalem, no darkness, no portents, and no confession of faith by a Roman centurion. All attention is directed to Jesus as King and to His strange throne—a cross!

Pilate’s superscription, “The King of the Jews,” is attached to the cross. Although the superscription is meant to serve as a taunt, it (ironically!) bears witness to Jesus’ authority. Jews object to its presence, but it remains (19:22). As in the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus is crucified between two men who are most likely political rebels being executed. Jesus’ executioners divide His garments among themselves. Women observe the entire event; they are not seen as prospective combatants. Perhaps (the apparently young) John can stand beneath the cross because he is not seen as a threat.

Jesus’ actions on the cross are regal and consistent with His behavior during His arrest and trial. From beginning to end, Jesus takes the initiative in all that happens. He is like the director of a play who also performs the role of the main character. He utters no cry of dereliction, of abandonment. He remains fully conscious and in control of Himself throughout. He entrusts His mother to the care of the youthful John (19:25b–27). He says, “I am thirsty” (19:28–29). His final cry proclaims victory, “It is finished”

(19:30). Jesus' executioners do not kill Him; *He bows His head and gives up His spirit* (19:30b). Jesus has completed His mission!

The body of a political rebel was usually denied decent burial; it was left hanging on the cross until it rotted or was eaten by birds and dogs. But Jesus' burial has royal features. His body is anointed with a royal quantity of spices (19:39) supplied by Nicodemus, a Jewish leader and a member of the Sanhedrin (3:1). He is buried in a new tomb (19:41–42) supplied by Joseph of Arimathea; kings were always buried in a new tomb. Both Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea treat Jesus as a family member by assuming care for His body. Furthermore, they render themselves ritually unclean and unable to observe Passover, and open to suspicion and possible charges for helping One seen to be a rebel.

Five main threads run through John's passion narrative. Jesus shows Himself to be:

- The perfect Passover Lamb dying for the sins of the world.
- The Good Shepherd freely offering His life for His sheep.
- The Son who carries out the will of His Father to the point of giving away life itself.
- The Judge of the world and Victor over the powers of darkness.
- The Messianic King enthroned in glory.

April 21, Easter Sunday: John 20:1–18 (or Luke 24:1–12)

John 20:1–2 *The First Witnesses*. Only men could testify in a Jewish court of law. The witness of women was considered invalid and unreliable. Nevertheless, every Gospel begins its Easter story with the visit of women or a woman to Jesus' tomb. The disciples, far from being overjoyed by the news that Mary has found the tomb empty, are nonplused. Peter and the other disciples do not say, "So the Lord was right! He is risen from the dead!" Mary Magdalene also shares her own confusion with them when she says, "We do not know where they have laid Him." John repeats a theme that runs through the story of Jesus' passion. Whereas Jesus has perfect knowledge, the disciples do not understand what is going on. Easter morning does not bring a quick flash of understanding and joy. For the disciples, the empty tomb constitutes a riddle that has to be explained despite the Lord's previous promises of His resurrection (2:19–22; 14:19–19, 28; 16:16).

Vv. 3–4 *An Easter Race!* The fact that the other disciple "whom Jesus loved" is not again named suggests that the readers knew who he was without having to be told. This suggestion is important for the first Easter story. Peter and John now have a race to the tomb. According to tradition, John lived until the end of the first century. He was probably younger than Peter—and perhaps also more fit. We can imagine all kinds of thoughts running through their heads as they sprint to the garden. "Where is the body? Who has taken it, and why? Will we be able to get the body back?" The gospel reports no such emotion; obviously we are meant to concentrate on the climax of the story.

Vv. 5–7 *All in Order*. Although he arrives first, the other disciple does not enter the tomb. He merely peeps in to see the burial clothes still there. Peter then arrives—possibly panting heavily. True to form, he acts before he thinks and goes straight in. All the body wrappings are there, including the head cloth neatly rolled up by itself. The point is clear. Jesus' body has not been snatched up by grave-robbers or

anyone else working in a hurry. There are no signs of a hurried break-in or a quick getaway. Only the body is missing.

Vv. 8–10 *Seeing is Believing.* Now the other disciple goes in, sees for himself, and believes that Jesus is risen from the dead. It is significant that it is said only of the second disciple that he believed. That makes good sense if this disciple was not only the great witness of the crucifixion (19:26, 35) and the empty tomb (20:8), but also the witness behind the whole of the Gospel. Verse 9 points to the fact that the two disciples had to see in order to believe. Later they were given more perfect sight and understanding. They came to understand the Scripture that long ago had foretold that all this had to take place. The whole of John's Easter story spells out the same message. The first believers had to see in order to believe. But now, for us, believing is seeing.

Vv. 11–13 *The Mystery Continues.* Mary Magdalene had not been with the two disciples and has not shared their faith. Now she is back at the tomb still lost in her sorrow. The empty tomb has still not spoken its Easter message to her. Even the sudden appearance of the two angels brings her no joy. Mary repeats the same message that she first delivered to Peter and John. Only this time she speaks for herself alone: "I do not know. . ." There is no loneliness like the loneliness of grief.

Vv. 14–16 *The Shepherd Calls His Lamb.* Mary is so lost in her world of sadness that she cannot see who it is that is standing close by. Note again how the evangelist piles up his references to the ignorance of the first Easter witnesses. Easter joy is created only after the truth bursts in on a lack of knowledge and understanding. Mary does not know the glorious truth that Jesus is risen until He speaks to her; see also vv. 2, 9, 13. His questions are rather strange (v. 15). Surely the Lord knows why she is crying, and for whom she is looking! The voice of the Man behind her is still not the voice of her Lord and Master—until He speaks her name. The Good Shepherd calls His lamb by name, and immediately the clouds of sorrow disappear. Mary now knows that this is not the gardener, but *Jesus*. There is both love and respect in the one word (in Hebrew) with which she addresses Jesus. He is still the same Teacher she has always known. And yet she now knows that she can never look at Him with the same eyes as before Easter. Jesus is the Lord in a new and wonderful sense.

Vv. 17–18 *Touch Me later.* Even if Mary understands that there is now a change in her relationship to Jesus, she does not yet fully understand how great the change is. She has apparently fallen on her knees and begun to cling to Jesus. What Jesus actually says is, "Stop holding Me." But why not touch Jesus any longer? The explanation is even stranger: "I have not yet ascended to the Father." These words make sense only if we spell out their positive meaning. Mary will only be able to touch the Lord properly after He has returned to His Heavenly Father. We are reminded of what Jesus said in 12:32: "I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people to Myself." His ascension to the Father began with His being lifted up on the cross; see 3:14, 8:28. Now the old human contacts that were possible between two human beings are a thing of the past. The only contact that matters now is the seeing and touching of faith. Whether Mary understands all this as yet we do not know. But at least she now has Easter joy and certainty—and with this joy she reports again to the disciples. How different is her message now from her first report (v. 3).

Although Mary hopes that her pre-crucifixion association with Jesus will be resumed, Jesus declares that He will not continue to live among His people as He did prior to His crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus must withdraw His presence from *one place* so that He might be present in *every place*. Jesus must take His *visible* leave of her so that He might remain *invisibly* with *her* and *His people everywhere*. Although

Jesus is about to withdraw His *visible* presence, He will not withdraw His *physical* presence. And in His ascension, Jesus will not *withdraw* His physical presence; He will *transform* it. Hence, we today are not waiting for His Second Coming but for His Final Reappearing. We live out life before the eyes of Jesus!

April 28, Second Sunday of Easter: John 20:19–31

V. 19: In John's narrative, Jesus meets first with Mary Magdalene, then with ten disciples, and a week later with eleven disciples. The meetings no doubt take place in Jerusalem. Although Mary Magdalene believed what the Risen Jesus said to her (20:1–18), the disciples continued to live in fear behind locked doors. Jesus' greeting, "Peace be with you!" reflects the promise that He made in 14:27. (Note also Matthew 28:16–20; Luke 24:36–39.) Jesus has no rebuke for the disciples who had abandoned Him, but only love.

V. 20: The theme of rejoicing in v. 20 reflects 16:22. In John, Jesus shows the disciples His hands and His side; in Luke 24:39–40, Jesus points them to His hands and feet.

V. 21: Jesus repeats His words of peace, and then "sends" them. The disciples ("those who learn") are now "those sent," apostles, though John does not use the latter term. The disciples are to perpetuate the work that Jesus' Father sent Him to do.

V. 22: "He breathed on them." As Adam's life came from God, the disciples' new spiritual life comes from Jesus. John's version of Pentecost is reflected in this verse. Note also Ezekiel 37:9 that describes dead bones being restored to life.

V. 23: Forgiveness of sins is not merely about personal repentance in relation to individual deeds. It has to do with the Spirit-empowered mission of the Christian community to continue Jesus' work of making God known to the world. It is to make people aware that, by nature, they stand under God's judgment, and then to point them to God's forgiving grace revealed in Jesus' ministry.

Vv. 24–25a: What the ten disciples announce to Thomas reflects what Mary proclaimed to the disciples; see 20:18, 25.

V. 25b: Thomas' initial response is no different from that of the disciples to Mary (20:19); they locked themselves in a room "for fear of the Jews." Thomas' words reflect the spirit of Nathanael's statement in 1:46.

V. 26: See v. 19. The risen Jesus does not rebuke His disciples. He says to them, "Peace be to you."

Vv. 27–28: Jesus' invitation to Thomas reflects what Thomas referred to in v. 25b. The end result is that Thomas goes from unbelief to belief, and he does so without touching Jesus. Although it is traditional to refer to Thomas as "doubting Thomas," it is better to point to Jesus meeting Thomas' demands to bring him to faith. Thomas' words, "My Lord and my God," reflect the message of the opening verse of John's Gospel (a literary inclusion, bracketing, book-ending) and constitute the most powerful confession of Jesus' identity in John's Gospel.

V. 29: The beatitude in v. 29b pronounces a blessing on future generations—those who will believe without seeing. Faith, not sight, matters!

Vv. 30–31: Although some see these words as the original conclusion to John’s Gospel, they might well serve as merely the conclusion to ch. 20. John wrote his Gospel so that people might believe in Jesus as God’s forgiving, Servant-Messiah and experience true life through their relationship with Him.

Final Comments

Jesus’ continuing presence among His people is stressed in 20:19–23 and 20:26–29. When Jesus appears among His followers, He does not “come” from anywhere. He is among them constantly, although invisibly. On several occasions, the risen Jesus reveals His presence in a visible way. His greeting on each occasion is, “Peace be with you” (20:21, 26).

John’s account compresses Jesus’ resurrection, ascension, and the giving of the Spirit (20:22). (According to John 7:39, the Holy Spirit will *appear on the scene and begin His work only after* Jesus’ coronation and resurrection.) “He breathed on them” reflects Genesis 2:7. Although Jesus says He will eventually send the Spirit to His disciples, He also says that He himself will come to them (14:28) and that He and the Father will make their home with them (14:23; see also Matthew 28:20; Romans 8:9–10; 1 Corinthians 3:16–17). When the Spirit comes, His mission will be to continue Jesus’ mission (16:14). He will teach and accomplish what Jesus would have taught and accomplished had Jesus not “gone away.”

The series of titles begun in chapter one reaches its grand finale in 20:28, “Lord and God.” Finally, John defines his purpose in writing his account: to inspire people to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and believing, to have life in His name (20:30–31).

May 5, Third Sunday of Easter: John 21:1–19

Although John’s Gospel probably ended initially at 20:31, chapter 21 describes the resources available to the post-resurrection community—the continuing presence of a Jesus who dines with His brothers and sisters and defines their mission and responsibilities. The fact that these shepherds and fishermen gather a huge haul of fish points to the fact that the Messianic Age has indeed broken in (see Ezekiel 47:1–12; note v. 9) and that success will crown their witness.

In this closing incident, the risen Lord feeds seven of His disciples with bread and fish, an act symbolizing His continuing presence among them and His bonding with them (e.g., His feeding them through the Eucharist). *Three times* Jesus asks Peter, who had denied Him *three times*, “Do you love me?” (21:15–17). He tells the disciples that some will have to experience martyrdom (21:18–19) and that His reappearing will not take place as soon as some might wish (21:20–23).

What follows is not an “exegetical analysis,” but the text of a sermon that I wrote some years ago—a sermon based on John 21.

Let’s go back in spirit to that first Good Friday night in Jerusalem. Jesus’ body has been taken down from the cross. It rests in a tomb. We might wonder what some of the key figures in the biblical drama were saying and doing during that strange night in Jerusalem.

Let's take Caiaphas, for example. Perhaps he was throwing a Passover party for his cronies, and perhaps he was urging them to celebrate and live it up a little. "Drink to it, fellows! We're rid of that upstart from Galilee."

What about Pilate? Perhaps he settled in for a candlelight supper with his wife in the Fortress of Antonia. And perhaps he said, "Governing this miserable little province is tough stuff! The quicker we can retire back in Rome, the better. Then we shall be able to draw Social Security, perhaps buy a townhouse in a good suburb of the city, and do a little skiing up in the Alps once in a while!"

Finally, the disciples! This little bunch of once-upon-a-time would-be heroes are huddled together behind locked doors—and scared to death! Their conversation is hardly stimulating: "Are we going to be next? What are we going to do now? Do any of you guys remember how to fish?"

To complicate matters, the disciples have to cope with some memories. They remember all those boasts that they had made about how they would remain loyal to Jesus no matter what happened. But when Jesus prays in the garden, they fall asleep. When the authorities come for Him, they run like rabbits. Finally, Peter denies Jesus, and uses a few nasty expletives in the process. The disciples are not rejoicing; they are *remembering*.

Then comes Easter Sunday morning. While that day is still young, strange rumors start to fly. Some of the women from the disciples' community are saying remarkable things. They are saying that Jesus is alive! Impossible! Things like that don't happen! But the women stick to their story.

And then on that first Easter Sunday night, all hell—or perhaps all heaven—begins to break loose! The disciples are still behind locked doors. And suddenly, Jesus appears! What do they think? Perhaps, "It's Jesus! How nice!" I doubt that. They are terrified. They have difficulty breathing. Their hair stands on end. "It's Him!"

Their minds are in turmoil. One night in an Upper Room Jesus washes their feet. The next day He is on a cross. That same night He lies dead in a tomb! And two nights later, He shows up alive! *Who is He?*

What do they say? Nothing! In the post-resurrection appearances, no one speaks to Jesus first. *Jesus* speaks first. What does He say? "Where did you guys go to last Friday?" No! He says, "Peace be with you!" And He says it twice (John 20:19, 21).

The next Sunday night the disciples are together again. This time that giant of confidence, Thomas, is with them. Again, the doors are locked. And again, Jesus suddenly appears. Maybe this time He'll drag up their nasty little pasts. But He doesn't. Again He says, "Peace be with you!" (20:26), and we begin to suspect that all this is not human, but in some inexplicable way, divine!

The grand finale comes a little later. John tells us about it in the final chapter of his Gospel (ch. 21). It happens up in Galilee. Late one afternoon, just before sunset, Peter says, "I'm going fishing." Six other disciples say, "We'll go with you." So out they go, about 100 yards from shore. They fish all night. They throw out the nets. They drag them in. Hour after hour—throughout the night! But they catch nothing. Frustrating!

Then God gets to work on the eastern sky. Deep blues become soft blues. Then a progression of other colors appears: red, orange, gold, and silver! The sea reflects the sky. While this is happening, the

disciples see Someone on the shore. They don't know who it is. He calls out to them, "You haven't caught any fish, have you?" *How did He know?* They reply, "No!"

He calls out again, "Try the other side of the boat!" Use your imagination. You are a fisherman. You've been fishing all night—on the left side of the boat. There are no fish there. Now Someone says, "Try the other side of the boat!" What would you have thought? (Perhaps, "Those tourists again!") However, the disciples try the other side of the boat. Immediately, their nets are full!

They now ask themselves, "Who is that Person on the beach? John drops to it first! *"It is the Lord!"* Peter jumps out of the boat, wraps some clothes around himself, and wades ashore. The others follow in the boat and beach it. They must now walk up to where Jesus is, look into His eyes, and wait for Him to speak.

They bring no fish with them. But they bring memories—of falling asleep, cowardice, and denials! And what does Jesus say this time? Ever so gently He says, "Come and have breakfast with Me." Perhaps they wonder if He'll rebuke them this time. But He doesn't! Perhaps they are tempted to ask, "When *are* You going to rebuke us for what we did to You?" Had they done so, I think He'd have looked at His hands, smiled a little sadly, shaken His head—and said nothing. He merely asks them, "Do you love Me?" And when they insist that they do, He says, "Feed My lambs; feed My sheep; feed My sheep!"

This, then, is the One into whose face each of us must look. This, then, is the one to Whom we must turn for answers to any questions that we might have about life, death, and eternity!

We believers who gather here have something in common. We agree as to Who this Person was and is. We believe that He was and is God Himself. We share a common faith with regard to His Cross and Resurrection! On the cross, He dealt with our sins once and for all. In the resurrection, He put His and our death to death—for time and eternity.

I'm thankful beyond words that I'm a Christian. However, I sometimes get the uncomfortable feeling that we don't understand quite as well as we might that our Lord lived the life of a Servant. To illustrate, on that fateful night before He went to the cross, Jesus took a basin, some water and some towels, and performed a task that only Gentile (non-Jewish) slaves would be expected to perform. He washed the disciples' feet.

Jesus' servant action was not a flash-in-the-pan affair. It reflected the very essence of Jesus' entire ministry. Servanthood constituted the total thrust of His life—from beginning to end! And the cross was merely, but **magnificently**, the final working out of His walking the way of a Servant-without-limit!

In one of the closing prayers that we use in our Eucharistic liturgies, we refer to Jesus' life as "the model of the godly life." In praying these words, we confess that we too are called to walk the way of a servant—without—limit. Not just sometimes, not just when we feel in the mood, but every second we are alive. And the implications for our walk as Christians and for our use of time, abilities, and material goods are mind-boggling.

Within a few weeks we shall celebrate the Ascension of our Lord. Although attendance at mid-week Ascension Day services is hardly the current rage, preachers and teachers in the church need to work hard at teaching people what we Christians mean when we say, "Jesus ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty."

When Jesus ascended, He did not take off for some distant but pleasant corner of the universe. The truth is that when Jesus “ascended,” He did not *withdraw* His presence; He *transformed* it! In short, Jesus is here! And He always will be! That means we live out life in His presence. To be a Christian, then, does not mean that we merely embrace a set of doctrines. It is to know that we have been embraced by Jesus! It is to live out life in the presence of a Person *Who is still here!*

We should feel as awestruck about that continuing Presence as the disciples felt in that Upper Room and on that Galilean shore! Although we are no more worthy to live in that Presence than were the disciples of old, He looks at each one of us with a divine kindness and says, “Peace be with you! Come and have breakfast! Do you love me! Feed My lambs! Feed My sheep!”

Incredible, but true! When we finally understand that we live out life in Jesus presence, we cannot but feel overwhelmed! He reaches out His hand to take hold of our hand! And we know that He’ll never let it go! Our hearts feel so warm, so full! We just know we’re going to want to serve Him as much as possible! And eventually we get up and begin our walk out into the world with Him. We can feel His hand gripping ours. It all feels so good!

Sometimes it happens that when, after worship, we get to the church door, suddenly . . .

suddenly . . . we can’t feel His hand or presence anymore. We think, “He’s gone!” We ask, “Jesus, where did you go to?” “Nowhere!” “I can’t see you! How can I serve you if I can’t see you?” “I’m still here. I’ve been with and around you all time. I always have been—I always will be. It’s just that I’m around you in disguise! I’m that hungry one, that thirsty one, that stranger, that person without clothing, that sick one, that prisoner. That’s Me—in disguise!”

And He continues: “See all those things around you that the world thinks so important? Those national flags, those different skin colors, those so-called symbols of success? They mean nothing in My Kingdom. In the world, greatness is measured by how many people you can get to serve you. In My Kingdom, greatness is measured by how many people you serve! Think of life as though there are only two people in the world—you and Me! You want to serve Me with all your life? There I am—all around you! That’s Me! I gave you life so that you could give it away to Me—through serving others. Even as I gave Mine away for you!” And the more we listen, the more we are overwhelmed and transformed!