

***Crossways International Handout for Gospel Readings—
April 1, 2, 4, 11, 18, 25 (2010)***

April 1, Maundy Thursday: John 13:1-17 (Vv. 31b-35 will be dealt with for Easter 5.)

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 locality in which 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 chs. 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, nor 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.

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, do, and say. 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 for, and service of, each other is the badge that reveals their identity to the world, 13:34,35.

April 2, Good Friday: John 18:1–19:42

This passage is often used Good Friday. The comments that follow are a repeat of what has been offered in previous pericope study helps.

THE TRIAL BEFORE ANNAS AND CAIAPHAS

1. 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 life on a cross—His finest hour, 17:1.
2. 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.
3. 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.
4. 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.
5. 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.

1. 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, 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, 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.
2. 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.
 3. 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!
 4. 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 them, 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 9:00 a.m., 15:25. John 19:14 says He was *handed over* for crucifixion at *midday*.
 5. 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

1. 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. There is no reference 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!.

2. 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. The Jews object to its presence, but it remains, 19:22. As in the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus is crucified between two men—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.
3. 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!
4. 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.
5. 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 4, Easter Sunday: John 20:1-18

Because the majority of passages assigned for this period of the Church Year are from John's Gospel, we shall focus on John 20:1-18 rather than Luke 24:1-12.

John 20:1,2 (The First Witnesses): Only men could give testimony 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; 14:18, 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 get-away. 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 says is actually: “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 He has 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 11, Easter 2: 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 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—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—although 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. Thought might also be given to Ezekiel 37:9; the chapter 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 Christian community's Spirit-empowered mission 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 25b. The end result is that Thomas goes from unbelief to belief—and 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 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.

Some summary 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 and 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.

April 18, Easter 3: John 21:1-19

Although John’s Gospel possibly did end initially at 20:31, ch. 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/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.

Caiaphas, for example. Perhaps he was throwing a Passover party for his cronies. 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 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 area 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 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 a 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 just 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!

And then God gets to work on the eastern sky. Deep blues become soft blues. Then a progression of other colors appear: red—orange—gold—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’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!*” Good God! 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 we might have about life, death, and eternity!

We 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 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.

Secondly, 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 awe-struck 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 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!

Peace be with you!

April 25, Easter 4: John 10:22-30

In John 10, Jesus declares Himself to be the Good Shepherd, the divine King—indicating that the ideal conditions of the End Time have found their fulfillment in and through His Messianic ministry, and though faith in Him and fellowship with Him. First, some comments about the preceding verses:

In **10:1-3a**, Jesus defines who is and who is not the shepherd by defining who has access to the sheepfold. The shepherd's identity is endorsed when the gatekeeper grants him access to the sheep. Vv. **10:3b-5** focus on the positive relationship between a shepherd and his sheep, and the negative relationship between a stranger and the sheep. The figure of speech Jesus draws on in **10:6-10** is found in Ezekiel 34:1-31. Ezekiel referred to the kings of Judah as bad shepherds who endanger the flock. God has to intervene and tend His sheep until they can be entrusted to the care of a true descendant of David. Although Jesus' words point to the Pharisees as those who endanger the flock, they do not see this. They think of themselves as shepherds—not as a thief or a stranger. Jesus is the *gate* who provides access to God for the flock and provides them with life.

The following two points help us understand the implications of Jesus' references to Himself as the Good Shepherd in **10:11-18**. *First*, in the western world, shepherds walk *behind* the flock, as do also the sheep dogs that they use. However, in the world of the Middle East, the shepherd walks *ahead of* the flock and blows on a whistle or makes a noise that the sheep recognize—and then follow. *Second*, when two or three shepherds decide they would like to spend some time talking with each other, their respective flocks mix together. When the shepherds go their own way once again, they

simply make the traditional call or sound, and the flock divides with each sheep following its own shepherd.

In **10:11**, Jesus refers to Himself as *the* Good Shepherd (*the*, not *a*). The term “shepherd” denotes “king” and “kingship.” Here, note the references to “shepherd” in Psalm 23, Jeremiah 23:1-8, and Ezekiel 34 where the term *shepherd* means *king*. Jesus is the Good Shepherd in two ways. *First* (**10:12,13**), Jesus is willing to lay down His life for His sheep, 1 Peter 2:25. The Pharisees are hirelings who shear the sheep but have no sense of loyalty toward them, Matthew 23:4,14; 10:16ff. When confronted by dangers to himself and his flock (perhaps in the form of an attacking wolf), the hireling flees! Jesus, the faithful Shepherd like David of old, remains with and protects His flock, 1 Samuel 17:34,35; Zechariah 11:7. *Second*, Jesus knows His sheep, **10:14,15**. His intimate knowledge of His flock, which involves limitless divine love, is His reason for laying down His life for them.

Jesus’ love goes out beyond Israel to the Gentiles, **10:16**. Although Jesus came first to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, His apostles and followers will go beyond these limits. They will proclaim Jesus’ messianic message of salvation to all nations. Jesus’ glorification will make this world-wide mission possible, **10:17,18**. His glorification springs from a death that no one forces on Him—a death that leads to His resurrection. Not only does Jesus have the power to lay down His life; He also has the power to take it up again. Little wonder then that Jesus’ Father loves Him! Jesus’ resurrection is an event in which His Father endorses and validates His Son’s Messianic servant ministry.

Jesus’ words cause a division among His hearers, **v. 19**. Some of His opponents seek to stone Him to death (**v. 14**). Some say that He is demon-possessed and out of His mind, **v. 20**; others disagree with this opinion, **v. 21**. Some plot to arrest Him, **v. 39**.

Vv. 22-30 describe what took place while Jesus was walking in the Jerusalem Temple (in Solomon’s Porch) during the Feast of Dedication; see **vv. 22,23**. This festival celebrated the rededication of the Temple in 164 B.C. after the Maccabees overcome the attempts of Antiochus IV “Epiphanes” to Hellenize the Jewish people. Jewish people continue to observe this festival on December 25, our Christmas Day.

V. 24: Some Jews gather around Jesus and ask Him to declare, once and for all, whether or not He is the Messiah.

Vv. 25-30: Almost every time Jesus is asked this question, He does not give a direct answer; see Luke 22:27,28. Why? The question is not a genuine request for the truth. How can Jesus make any plainer what He has already said? All that He can do is again refer to the witness of His works and actions; see 5:35, 10:38. If these people had belonged to His flock, they would not have to ask this question; they would know immediately who Jesus is.

Jesus does not say who He is, but rather what He gives to His sheep. That should make clear His identity. Above all, He points to the Father with whom He is one. They are one God, with the same will, and the same saving plan for the lost sheep of humanity.

How do Jesus’ questioners react? Once again, they take up stones to stone Him, 10:31.

Still today many find it difficult to understand and embrace Jesus’ big message—a message that we, His sheep, need to hear, read, and heed constantly. God’s “big truth” is that He does not call us merely to *believe in His Son*; He calls us also to *follow Him*.

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