

Homily for the Third Sunday of Easter, Year B

April 14, 2024

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Acts of the Apostles 3:13-15, 17-19 (Repent, that your sins may be wiped away.)

Responsory: Psalm 4 (Lord, let your face shine on us.)

Second Reading: 1 John 2:1-5a (He is expiation for the sins of the whole world.)

Gospel: Luke 24:35-48 (Jesus appears to his disciples and explains the meaning of his passion and death.)

This passage from the Gospel of Luke doesn't exactly match with the sequence of events that we heard about last week, in the Gospel of John. According to John's timeline, Mary Magdalene is the first to encounter the Risen Jesus, outside the empty tomb, early in the morning on the day of his resurrection. Although she immediately runs to tell the Eleven that she has seen the Lord, no one else sees Jesus until that evening, when he suddenly appears to *ten* of the apostles. Since Thomas is absent, and he refuses to believe that the others have seen the Lord, Jesus returns *the following Sunday evening*, when all eleven, including Thomas, are present.

Luke has a somewhat different timeline. Jesus never makes an appearance at the tomb. Instead, several women of Galilee, including Mary Magdalene, encounter two angels there. The angels proclaim that Jesus has risen, but no one can quite believe it yet, since nobody has seen him alive. Then, later that same day, Jesus approaches two disciples walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus, a few miles away. Without revealing his identity, he engages them in conversation about his own passion and death, and he explains all the Old Testament passages that referred to him in any way. When they arrive at their destination, around sunset, they sit down for a meal together, and the disciples suddenly recognize Jesus as he breaks the bread. They immediately run back to Jerusalem to tell the Eleven and, lo and behold, Jesus appears to all of them. That brings us to the passage that we just heard. Jesus convinces the Eleven that he has come back from the dead, and then he opens *their* minds to understand the Scriptures, just as he had done for those two other disciples on the road to Emmaus.

One common thread in all of the post-resurrection accounts is that those who saw Jesus on that first Easter Day had a hard time recognizing him at first, and then struggled to believe their own eyes once they *did* recognize him. Even displaying the wounds in his hands and feet and side wasn't necessarily proof enough. Maybe this was merely the *ghost* of Jesus, not the *risen* Jesus! I guess we shouldn't be surprised by any of this, considering the trauma that all of those disciples had suffered over the past few days. They had seen their dear friend arrested, tortured, paraded through the streets, and crucified. Then, his dead body was hastily taken down from the cross and placed in a tomb. Now, on the third day, he suddenly appears before them, alive and well but physically unrecognizable. Oh, and he can now pass through locked doors, too. Let's not forget that little detail. Frankly, if I had been there, I'm not sure that seeing Jesus eat a piece of cooked fish would have been enough to convince me.

There's something else about these appearance stories that I also find curious. At no time does Jesus ever explain *what has happened to him*. When something amazing happens to us, we like to tell people all about it, often in such excruciating detail that they ask us to cut to the chase and give them the short version instead. But Jesus never describes what it was like to rise from the dead. Instead, he focuses exclusively on *why he had to suffer and die*. Jesus reminds his disciples that he spoke about these things when he was still with them, but they failed to understand. Now, according to Luke, Jesus "opens their minds to understand the Scriptures," as he had done hours earlier for those two other disciples on the road to Emmaus. Jesus then concludes his lesson by saying, "Thus it is written that the Christ would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and that *repentance, for the forgiveness of sins*, would be preached in his name to all the nations, beginning in Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things."

Note, the main message that Jesus commissions his apostles to preach to the nations is *not* about his own resurrection from the dead, but about *repentance for the forgiveness of sins*. That was the reason why he suffered, died, and rose again. Everything that happened to him was for the *forgiveness of our sins*. Hence, the Good News of Jesus Christ is as much about *us* as it is about him. He gave his life *for us*, so that when we turn back to God and ask for forgiveness, we might *receive* it. And we can see in the Acts of the Apostles how those witnesses followed Jesus' instructions. After proclaiming to the crowd that God has raised up and glorified the Holy and Righteous One, whom they had put to death, Peter immediately transitions into the message of repentance and forgiveness. He explains that all of these tragic events transpired, in fulfillment of prophecy, so that our sins could be forgiven. He pleads with them, "*Repent, therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be wiped away.*"

That is a powerful and uplifting message. Yet, there is a still deeper level to the Christian proclamation, which speaks to the new covenant in the blood of Christ. The Law of Moses already provided rituals for the expiation of sins. Jewish people could go to the Temple at any time to offer sacrifices for their sins. And, on the annual feast of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the High Priest would celebrate a more elaborate ritual to seek forgiveness for the whole nation of Israel. So, repentance and forgiveness were already an integral part of the *first covenant* between God and his chosen people. But Christ's death on the cross has fundamentally altered the relationship between God and *all of humanity*. As St. John explains in his First Letter, Jesus is expiation "not for *our sins only*, but for those of the *whole world*." In other words, the effect of Christ's sacrifice extends beyond the forgiveness of our individual sins, or even the sins of just one nation or people. His sacrifice has ended the reign of sin and death in the world and opened the way to salvation for all who believe in him. So, when we proclaim the death and resurrection of Christ, as a fact of history, we are *also* proclaiming the *future* promise of resurrection from the dead for all who believe in Christ and turn to him for mercy. That means that the Easter message of the Church is not merely, "Christ is risen, Alleluia!" That's certainly true, but our proclamation is *far greater*: "*We also will rise with Christ!*" He is also *our* hope and *our* salvation. Alleluia, Alleluia!