

Homily for Easter Sunday

March 31, 2024

St. Bavo Parish

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

First Reading: Acts of the Apostles 10:34a, 37-43 (Testimony to Jesus' resurrection.)

Responsory: Psalm 118 (This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad.)

Second Reading: Colossians 3:1-4 (Think of what is above, not of what is on earth.)

Gospel: John 20:1-9 (The empty tomb.)

Throughout the year, at almost every single mass, *Jesus* is the main character in the gospel reading. That's to be expected, I suppose. After all, the gospel *is* the story of Jesus' life. Why wouldn't he be the center of attention every time? So, throughout Ordinary Time, we follow the events of his life and ministry. During Holy Week, we recall the tragic events leading up to his death. And, in the Easter Season, we hear numerous stories about his post-resurrection appearances. But today, on Easter Sunday, when we commemorate the greatest moment in all of human history, the day that Jesus rose victorious from the tomb, he is nowhere to be found. Apparently, no one actually witnessed the Resurrection as it was taking place. Furthermore, it seems that Jesus never bothered to tell anyone what happened to him that first Easter morning. So, rather than an inspiring eyewitness account, we are left with nothing but an empty tomb and some discarded burial cloths. And yet, like the Beloved Disciple standing in the midst of that empty tomb, *we believe*.

Today the *Beloved Disciple* takes center stage, rather than Jesus. Traditionally, he has been identified with the author of the Fourth Gospel, St. John the Apostle. However, he is never named. John always refers to him simply as, "the disciple whom Jesus loved." In reality, he may be more of a *symbol* than a real person, an idealized version of a disciple rather than one of the actual twelve apostles. Whenever the Beloved Disciple appears on the scene, he always shows us how an ideal disciple would respond in that situation. And, unfortunately, his response often contrasts markedly with those of the other disciples, whose conduct tends to be far from ideal.

For example, in John's Passion Narrative, which we heard on Good Friday, after Jesus drops his bombshell that one of the men sitting around the table with him at the Last Supper is going to betray him, all the other disciples break into hysterics, wondering how anyone could possibly do such a thing. But the Beloved Disciple reacts very differently. He leans his head against Jesus' chest, in a gesture of great intimacy, and asks who it is. If all of the disciples had been so close to Jesus, perhaps the events of Good Friday might have played out very differently.

Later, when Jesus is on trial before the religious authorities, Peter famously denies him three times. According to the other three gospels, Peter is the only one there, because all the other disciples had fled in fear. But John places the Beloved Disciple in the scene to show us what all of the disciples *should have done*. While the others run and hide, and Peter denies knowing Jesus, and then goes out and weeps bitterly, the Beloved Disciple *remains* and keeps vigil. He is unafraid to be counted among Jesus' friends and followers.

All three of the other gospels also show Jesus dying on the cross with only his mother and some other women to accompany him, because all of his closest disciples have abandoned him. Once again, John places the Beloved Disciple there, where *all of the disciples* should have been. Jesus even commends him to his mother, indicating that Mary would become a type of spiritual mother for *all* of Jesus' faithful disciples. Hence, in that instance, the Beloved Disciple represents not only an *ideal* disciple, but also the *whole community of disciples* who would one day claim the title of "Christian."

Today's gospel, however, shows the Beloved Disciple in his finest hour, on Easter morning. Three disciples encounter the same empty tomb, and they have three very different reactions. Mary Magdalene sees the condition of the tomb, and she assumes that *someone has stolen the body*. She can think of no other rational explanation. Peter then enters the tomb and looks around, and he is simply *bewildered*. He doesn't know what to think. Finally, the Beloved Disciple enters the tomb, sees the very same thing that Peter and Mary Magdalene had seen, and *he believes*.

In this character of the Beloved Disciple, we see the faith of the Church, the faith of countless Christians throughout the centuries, who have believed without the benefit of seeing the Risen Lord. In the Beloved Disciple we also see a reflection of *our own faith*. We have not seen, yet we believe, and rejoice in, the Resurrection of Christ from the dead. If we want that faith to remain strong and vibrant throughout our lives, then we should look to all of those other stories featuring the Beloved Disciple and learn from him. At the Last Supper, we can see the intimacy which made Jesus more than a teacher and master for him, but a very dear and trusted friend. Intimacy with Jesus is key for us, too. It is that close, personal relationship with the Lord that will keep bringing us back to prayer and to the sacraments of the Church. Outside the residence of the High Priest, the Beloved Disciple shows us the courage necessary to be a true follower of Jesus. We, too, must be willing to stand up and be counted among Jesus' followers, even when doing so may be countercultural, unpopular, or even dangerous. And, at the foot of the Cross, the Beloved Disciple shows us how to suffer with and for Jesus, as all of us will be called to do at various times in our lives. In those moments, when much is asked of us, we can draw strength from remembering how Jesus gave everything for us.

Perhaps the real reason why John never identified the Beloved Disciple is because he wanted *us* to identify with him. He wanted all of us who believe in Jesus and his Resurrection to see *ourselves* as the disciples whom Jesus loves *today*. Let us embrace that challenge, that opportunity, and that identity. We believe in the Risen Lord. We have experienced his deep love for us. Let us boldly proclaim him to the world, by all that we say and do.