

[Scripture for Life](#)



(Julie Lonneman)



by Roger Karban

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No Scripture passage could set a more insightful theme for the month of April than the Fifth Sunday of Lent's first reading. The only problem is that it should be read in its original Hebrew, not in an English translation.

Prophesying during the sixth century B.C.E. Babylonian Exile, Deutero-Isaiah reassures his fellow Israelites that Yahweh is about to liberate them. Yet he frequently encounters a huge obstacle. The chosen people are fully aware of the great things Yahweh has done for them through the centuries; they hear about them whenever they gather for worship or prayer. But they are no longer living in the 12th century B.C.E., and they are hundreds of miles removed from the promised land. Those to whom Deutero-Isaiah prophesies want to know, "What has God done for me lately, in downtown Babylon?"

This unnamed prophet answers their objection by ingeniously using participles instead of finite verbs when he speaks of Yahweh entering their lives. He spreads the action out. For instance, instead of saying, "Thus says the LORD, who opens a way in the sea ..." he proclaims, "Opening a way in the sea, Yahweh ..." Participles make the action continue. It isn't something that happens and then is over; the action goes on. What Yahweh's done in the past, Yahweh continues to do right here and now.

The problem for us is that the prophet's Hebrew participles are usually translated as "Yahweh who..." followed by a verb in the present tense, for example, "the Lord who opens a way..." The translation doesn't seem to zero in on the continuing action in the same way that employing a participle does.

But if there is still any doubt why Deutero-Isaiah uses participles in this context, he quickly removes all confusion, proclaiming some of Yahweh's most forceful words: "Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not; see, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" The prophet isn't inviting his people to tour a museum, he is forcing them to see what is actually happening in their lives as he speaks. He refuses just to deal in memories.

This insight is also at the heart of Paul of Tarsus' life and ministry. Yet in this Sunday's second reading, he confesses to his Philippians community that experiencing the risen Jesus in the present is a mixed bag. Though he is well along

the path to "perfect maturity," he still hasn't taken "possession" of it. "Forgetting what lies behind but straining forward to what lies ahead, I continue my pursuit toward the goal." The present will last a lifetime for the apostle, a lifetime in which he constantly hears the words of the psalmist reflecting on the "great things" Yahweh is doing for him.

We are reminded in today's Gospel that much of the present we experience consists in forgiving others. Jesus leads the way by forgiving the anonymous adulterous woman, providing us one of the best known of all Scripture quotes: "Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone." Though scholars agree this narrative wasn't originally part of John's Gospel, the story and the lesson it teaches made such an impression on generations of Christians that it couldn't be ignored. (An argument for keeping the canon of Scripture open.) The passage presumes if we refuse to forgive, we're refusing to live in the present. Since the story wasn't originally included in any of the canonical Gospels it could easily have been forgotten. Only the community's constant need to forgive kept it alive until it eventually found a home.

Our traditional Palm Sunday readings trigger a similar examination of conscience. They are as pertinent to what is going on in our lives as the breakfast we ate this morning. If we are thinking only of the past as we hear these words, we have totally missed the point of the liturgy we are celebrating.

Carroll Stuhlmueller frequently insisted that the best definition of a disciple of God is contained in this third song of the Suffering Servant of Yahweh. Deutero-Isaiah states, "Morning after morning he [Yahweh] opens my ear that I may hear." According to Carroll, God's true followers hit the floor every morning listening. Even before they say their prayers, they are listening for what God wants them to pray. It's never the same. Since the prophet's ministry is "to speak to the weary a word that will rouse them," we presume he personally prays to know both what is causing their weariness and what to say and do to alleviate it.

Paul, again writing to his Philippians, encourages them to listen to how the risen Jesus is telling them to die and rise with him. If they are not emptying themselves for others in their daily lives, they are not properly developing into other Christs. They will never be "exalted" in the way he is now exalted.

One aspect of emptying that Luke uniquely conveys in his Passion narrative is Christ's habitual concern for others. Only Luke's Jesus, for instance, heals the man whose ear was lopped off in the garden, looks directly at Peter after his denial, comforts the women lamenting his suffering, and assures the repentant thief he will share in paradise. The pain his Jesus is enduring doesn't stop him from helping others in pain. Luke teaches that our personal suffering never excuses us from relieving the suffering of those around us. I presume when he hears the psalmist question Yahweh's presence, he responds, "He/she is as close to us as the nearest person in need."

No matter the pain, the great liturgical turnabout takes place at the Easter Vigil.

One hint this Holy Saturday eucharistic formula is ancient comes from the fact that on this most important of Christian feasts, the first seven readings are from the Hebrew, not the Christian Scriptures, from a time when the Christian Scriptures were not yet regarded as "bible." The Gospels and Paul's letters only seem to have been thought of as divinely inspired sometime during the late third century. (See "Codex Sinaiticus.") When most of tonight's liturgy was put together, Christians still filtered their understanding of Jesus' resurrection through the Hebrew, not the Christian Scriptures.

Ideally, all nine readings should be proclaimed. Though each revolves around life, each looks at it from a different angle. We're not just to be content with the entombed Jesus starting to breathe again. Since, as Paul reminded the Corinthians, he became a "new creation" on this night, there are countless implications of his resurrection. Nine don't even scratch the surface. Each simply brings up one more dimension of an event we've yet to completely understand.

If for some "pastoral" reason we plan on skipping most of tonight's readings from the Hebrew Scriptures, the church demands we at least read the third passage — the one from Exodus 3: the crossing of the sea. A favorite of early Christian communities, it stresses the dramatic before and after of Yahweh's actions in the lives of the chosen people. On one side of the sea is slavery and death; on the other, freedom and life. Nothing better helped the people of the risen Jesus reflect on the event they were remembering this night. What happened to him is happening to them as they listen to the narrative.

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Accustomed to just having a few drops of water poured over the heads of those being baptized, we miss the impact of Paul's words to the Romans reminding them of having been "buried" with Christ during their own baptisms. Because they'd been totally dunked down into the water, I presume some thought they actually were being drowned. They clearly understood what it meant to symbolically die with Christ, then be raised up. It was a perfect "outward sign" of what baptism accomplishes. No wonder they automatically joined with the psalmist in singing, "I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of Yahweh" (Psalm 118:17).

Luke conveys that same dying/rising contrast in this evening's Gospel. The Galilean women who carry spices to the tomb to anoint a dead man, learn he is not only alive, but is offering them a new, unique life. Of course, it seems nonsense to those who have yet to experience it, even to Peter, the Gospel disciple who has most to gain from that life. It's no longer just a story; it's an occurrence that's become an essential part of their lives. It's not just an event they can rattle off by heart; it's the most important aspect of who they are.

In some sense, Luke plays the role of Deutero-Isaiah in the Christian Scriptures. But instead of using participles, he writes the Acts of the Apostles. The narratives in that second volume of his Gospel demonstrate that what the historical Jesus once did, the risen Jesus, through his followers, continues to do.

The "summary" contained in the first reading of the Second Sunday of Easter perfectly conveys that insight. Now, it is no longer the Gospel Jesus who cures the sick who are laid out on the streets; one of his disciples, Peter, takes over that ministry. What the Galilean carpenter once did, Peter and his fellow disciples now do. Once they experienced Jesus' resurrection, Christians quickly discovered they weren't living in a "once upon a time" world. They were convinced, as was the psalmist, "This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad." We don't have to go back to another day or wait for another day. This is the day in which Yahweh is working.

The apocalyptic author of Revelation encountered that same theology. His/her God is "the one who lives." As much as this genre of writers constantly zeroed in on the future, the basis for their conviction that God will eventually deliver people from their persecutions sprang from a belief that God is already beginning that deliverance right here and now.

Though we frequently hear the first part of today's Gospel pericope, the second part also contains something essential to our faith. The Gospel Jesus' remark to Thomas takes something for granted few of us notice. "Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed."

We usually apply these words to ourselves. Living 20 centuries after the historical Jesus, we believe in him though none of us have actually seen the tremendous things he did. But this statement also applies to our sacred Christian authors. Modern scholars are convinced no one who actually experienced the historical Jesus ever wrote anything that has come down to us. That includes even John, the author of this pericope. If these writers didn't presume the risen Jesus was working in their lives as they wrote, we would have no Christian Scriptures. They weren't falling back on their memories; they were reflecting on their present experiences. That's why at times it's difficult to distinguish the Gospel words and actions of the historical Jesus from the risen Jesus. Our sacred writers never made that distinction.

Perhaps our desire to do so might be a sign we really don't understand what they are trying to accomplish, even without knowing anything about participles.

Editor's note: *This reflection was originally published in the April 2019 issue of [Celebration](#). Sign up to receive [daily Lenten reflections](#).*

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