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When Mark opened his Gospel with the words, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ,” he was telling us the title of the entire work: The “beginning of the gospel” applies to Mark 1:1 to 16:8. Mark’s last verse challenges the reader to take up the task of continuing the work that Jesus began. According to Mark, the last part of this most important story in history begins with a small group of women taking on an impossible task. They were carrying spices to anoint a body they didn’t expect to be able to see or touch. But that’s only a small detail in this symbol-laden narrative. Mark’s Gospel usually seems very simple and direct, but he fills this narrative with symbolic ideas and gestures so that we can hear the story again and again, each time understanding it more deeply.

Mark writes that as they arrived at Jesus’ tomb, the major concern of the women who had witnessed Jesus’ death was the humongous stone that walled his body off from the land of the living. The only words we hear from them question who could move that boulder.

From the way Mark narrates the story, it seems that the women were talking to one another near the sealed tomb when they looked up and discovered that the stone had been rolled back as if from the inside. The place of death had been broken open, and terrifying as it was, they went in and encountered a messenger who told them that Jesus the crucified had been raised and could not be found in the realm of death. The messenger then commissioned them to send Jesus’ disciples to Galilee where they would see him as he had told them.

This is where the Easter Sunday Gospel stops. It ends much as Mark ended his Gospel by telling the disciples to go back to where it all began and retrace their journey of discipleship, this time a little better prepared to understand what it was all about.

More than any other evangelist, Mark is aware of the frailty of the disciples. He knows that they are thickheaded and slow of heart and that it takes more than one vision for them to come to active belief — that’s why he told two stories of Jesus healing a blind person and sandwiched Jesus’ three predictions of his passion in between them. It’s not a simple thing to allow Jesus to open our eyes.

That stone that concerned the women, the barrier between them and Jesus, turned out not to be what they thought. The fact that they were going to anoint him indicated that they had accepted his death; the fact that they expected the stone to block their way indicated that they didn’t understand it. The stone that sealed the tomb signified the absolute finality of

death, the end of relationship and the burial of hope. It was the symbol of the tragedy of mortality and the women who had stood by as Jesus was executed had faced and accepted it. They had done more than their male companions who had changed the subject when Jesus spoke of his death and fled when he confronted it.

Like most Christians, the women took the next step without knowing what it meant. They went into the tomb. With that step, they went beyond witnessing Jesus' death. Now, they were symbolically participating in it. That step made good on their sharing of the cup with him at the Last Supper, but they still didn't comprehend it. The world had been turned upside down, nothing meant what it had before, and they were justifiably terrified. God's messenger in the tomb told the women to announce that Jesus had been raised to the disciples. They were to tell the disciples to start all over again so that they could understand that everything Jesus did was, as Mark said in the first verse of his Gospel, just the beginning.

The women's entry into the tomb, like our baptism into the death of Jesus, was the first step in a lifelong process. Paul's letter to the Colossians reminds us that through baptism we have died and risen with Christ and that brings us into a new realm of existence. But this is not magic. It requires a long process of going back to the beginning and understanding again and again who Christ is and what it means to be his disciple.

Easter Sunday is the beginning of a 50-day period of celebration and meditation on the Christian mystery. Today we are invited to journey with those faithful women who were ready to attempt an impossible final act of love only to discover that nothing was as it had seemed. This is the beginning, not the end.

ACTS 10:34a, 37-43

The readings of the Easter season are designed to be a catechesis for the newly baptized — and a refresher for those baptized long ago. Another feature of the season is that the first reading on Sundays is from the Acts of the Apostles rather than from the Hebrew Scriptures, thus offering a short course in the first growth of our faith tradition.

Luke opens the segment of Peter's last homily that we hear today in a solemn way. By making the formal announcement that "Peter proceeded to speak and said..." Peter's homily summarizes the story of Jesus from the viewpoints of God, Jesus and the disciples. Peter tells us that this all happened in a real moment of history (after John the Baptist) and that it was all God's initiative (God anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and power). He tells us what Jesus did (went about healing and doing good), who saw it (we are witnesses) and what happened (they put him to death). He concludes by proclaiming what God did (raised him on the third day and granted that he be visible) and what it means to us (he commissioned us to preach). At the end, Peter reaches back into history to say that everything about Jesus was foretold by the prophets, and finally, he tells us what it means for all of humanity.

The principal actor in this entire proclamation is God. God anointed Jesus and raised him. But even more importantly for us, God appointed him as judge of the living and the dead so that he could offer forgiveness to all who believe in him.

If we have never paid much attention to Peter's description of Jesus as judge it may surprise us. Peter says nothing about separating good from evil or rewards and punishments. The role of this judge is to dispense forgiveness to all who believe in him — in other words, to all who seek it and believe it is possible.

This announcement summarizes the mission God gave Jesus and also tells us a lot about Peter as the representative of all evangelizers. First of all, it reiterates in the simplest form possible that God's outreach to humanity is designed specifically to bring all people into the realm of divine love. Sin is of no interest to God. The entire purpose of Jesus' mission was to bring people home to God.

Secondly, the fact that Peter could preach this homily means that he, too, had been converted. He's no longer among those seeking a place of honor; he's not going to pull out a sword against anyone. He's simply a witness, someone whose entire life has become dedicated to giving testimony to what God has revealed in Jesus. When we stop to consider it, this last homily we will hear from Peter shows him to be among the freest and happiest of all people. He has nothing to prove. All he wants to do is extend the offer God has made in Jesus, and he has chosen to use the rest of his life to disseminate that offer as far and wide as possible.

PSALMS 118:1-2, 16-17, 22-23

Taken as a whole, this psalm is a joyful song of ascents that could have been sung by pilgrims going up to the temple. It is also the last of the five “hallel” psalms, songs which begin with the word Hallelujah and is translated literally as “Praise the Lord.” These psalms recount and celebrate God’s saving deeds.

Psalm 118 is particularly thought of as the Easter psalm as it celebrates God’s victory and highlights the famous line, “The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.” That line originally referred to Israel herself, the supposedly insignificant nation who, although surrounded by powerful enemies, was destined to be light for the world.

Christians find this psalm particularly apt for Easter. The first strophe celebrates what Peter proclaimed in the reading from Acts: God’s mercy endures forever. In Hebrew that mercy (hesed) refers to God’s covenant love, the unceasing love that seeks no recompense but only the good of the beloved.

The second strophe reflects on God’s power to give and preserve life. This is particularly applicable to the resurrection of Christ and recalls that before his passion he tried to convey his certainty that he would not die but live.

The psalm refrain offers us the invitation to reflect over and over again on the message of this day. As we move with the disciples from the time when Jesus’ enemies had their day, when they unleashed all the terror of their mortal

power, we do well to stand astounded with the disciples trying to take in the mystery of the day the Lord has made. We rejoice, we are glad, and we know we need to delve deeper into the mystery.

COLOSSIANS 3:1-4

If our reading from Acts showed us a change in Peter, the Letter to the Colossians reflects on an even more radical transformation. The author whom we can call Paul, was interested in the community coming to the realization that Christ’s redemptive work was complete and needed no additions. In the process, the letter gives us this gem of a reflection for our Easter meditation.

Paul is not making an ethical demand on the community here, but rather leading them through a reflection on what has happened to them through their identification with Christ in baptism.

Paul invites the Colossians to ponder the effects of their baptism with him. While they (and we) may have easily mouthed the belief that they had been raised with Christ, Paul wants them to grapple with the implications of that truth.

When he says, “Think of what is above, not what is on earth,” he is not telling them to look at heaven, but rather to revise their way of looking at their surroundings and everyone they encounter. Because of their participation in Christ, everything has taken on a new meaning; they must learn to see it all in the light of their destiny of union with God. It is as if Paul were saying, “Through baptism you have been brought into a new place of absolute freedom. Now, explore it and get used to it. Act like you belong here!”

MARK 16: 1-7

“Stark Mark” ends his Gospel in a typically curt and cryptic fashion. Mark 16:1-8 is generally accepted as the original ending of Mark’s Gospel, a finish so unsatisfactory that later editors added more acceptable conclusions that reported appearances of the risen Lord. Since the early centuries, the church has accepted the longer endings as part of this Gospel, but there is much to learn from the way Mark originally brought his work to its finale.

Portuguese Scripture scholar Silvano Fausti in his book, *Aminteste-ti Si Istoriseste Evanghelia*, reflects on today’s Gospel line by line. His commentary frames the story by noting that these events began on the day after the Sabbath, the eighth day or the first day of the new creation. As that day dawns, women representing the womb of earthly life go to the tomb, an opening in the earth which has housed death. The sun which had been darkened at Jesus’ death is now rising. They wonder what they can do about the unmovable stone — the symbol of death’s permanence, the gigantic barrier that

afflicts everyone on each side of it.

Then the women discovered that the stone had been rolled back as if from the inside. With the strength that can only come from being together, they faced death as never before and entered into the tomb of Jesus, the burial place of all their hopes. There they received the news that he was not there, death had not overcome him. Someone dressed like the newly baptized proclaimed the core Christian message: Jesus, the crucified, has been raised, you will not find him in the realm of death.

These women, provisioned with nothing more than one another and their spices, had decided to confront an unalterable reality: the unmovable barrier of Jesus' gravestone. When they arrived, nothing was as expected. The impenetrable barrier between life and death was rolled back. They entered his tomb, crossing over into the realm of his death just as each Christian does in baptism. There they discovered not that they were saved from death but that they were saved in Christ's death and through their participation in it.

They heard the words of the messenger, "He has been raised; he is not here." Looking at the now vacant place where he had been laid, their eyes told them what their minds still couldn't comprehend: Death itself had been emptied of its power.

Once the women had taken in the impossible scene before them, the messenger who had announced what had happened now spoke in Christ's name giving them a mission: "Go and tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you.'"

These women were sent as the first apostles to tell the news of Christ's resurrection. It was a message they could barely intuit much less comprehend. Like any neophyte, like most of us, they might have had an inkling of what this good news meant, but it was immeasurably more than they could take in. Their world had been shattered by Jesus' death, and now everything they thought they knew about life and death was thrown into question. It was impossible for them to immediately grasp the implications of what they had seen and heard. Mark tells us that they fled from the tomb, impelled by such fear that they were actually trembling and by such "bewilderment" (ekstasis) that they were literally beside themselves or out of their senses. Having explained that, Mark ends his Gospel with the words, "They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (16:8).

We know that was not the end of the story, but Mark put it there as a call to action. Mark opened his Gospel calling it "the beginning of the Gospel." The finale of Mark's writing that he called the beginning of the Gospel, is this scene in which the most faithful disciples encounter the most incomprehensible good news and are overwhelmed. That is why the disciples are sent back to Galilee where it all started. There with the risen Lord among them, they can begin again to understand what he had taught them.

Planning: Easter

By: Lawrence Mick

Well, it's not a crisis, really, but Holy Thursday has an identity problem. Since it is the night of the Last Supper, we naturally think of it as a celebration of the institution of the Eucharist. Some clerical-minded folk link it also to the institution of the priesthood, since a priest is required for celebrating the Eucharist.

At the same time, the Evening Mass on Holy Thursday is part of a larger whole. It is the beginning of the Triduum, the great three-day celebration at the heart of the liturgical year. One indication of this part of the liturgy's identity can be found in the entrance antiphon in the Missal: "We should glory in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom is our salvation, life and resurrection, through whom we are saved and delivered." Notice that there is no mention of the Eucharist or the priesthood in that antiphon. We often use a hymn to begin Mass rather than the antiphon in the Missal, but this might be a good time to make an exception. Several composers have written settings of this antiphon, including Tony Alonzo, Ricky Manalo, Paul Tate and Steven Janco. If you can't get the music and learn one of these this year, find a hymn that expresses similar thoughts.

This is not to suggest that the Eucharist and the priesthood are unimportant, but they need to be placed in the larger context of the whole paschal mystery that is celebrated during the Triduum. None of the Triduum liturgies stand alone; they might even be understood as one liturgy that spans three days. The key is to keep a holistic view.

Some of the challenge comes from the tendency to view the Eucharist as primarily the reserved sacrament rather than the action of giving thanks and praise and entering into communion with God and with each other. One corrective to this imbalance might be found in the ritual of the washing of the feet. Though listed as optional in the Missal, this action is important for emphasizing what the Eucharist requires of us. The Triduum celebrates Christ's self-giving love, and this ritual powerfully reminds us that we are called to the same kind of self-sacrifice for others.

Take the time needed to figure out the best way to involve the whole assembly in this ritual. It is not restricted to 12 men (and remember that Pope Francis explicitly includes women) but is best carried out so that all can have their feet washed and perhaps also wash the feet of others. This requires multiple chairs, pitchers, bowls and towels with well-coordinated movements by those who arrange them. It's worth the time and effort!

Prayers: Easter

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

We have heard this story so often that it may fail to impress us. Our attention may be more on Easter dinner, dyed eggs and baskets of candy. But how would this day be different if we had just discovered there is more to life than we could possibly have imagined? What difference would this discovery make on Monday morning?

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you were not in the tomb on that morning: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you came to teach us of life after death: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to see life with new meaning: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray for all those throughout the world seeking the hope of new life.

Minister For the whole church: that it may be an ongoing faithful witness to the full meaning of life ... we pray,

- For those who have given up on life, who live in deep poverty, in hopeless injustice, or in the midst of violence and death ... we pray,
- For those who hold out hope for the future, who see endless possibilities and share them with others ... we pray,
- For those who protect and promote life in every form, despite personal or political risk; and for those who resist them ... we pray,
- For the willingness and courage to set Jesus Christ as the cornerstone of our lives, an act that would be true cause for rejoicing and praise this Easter ... we pray,
- For those in this community who need to hear the Easter message; and for the motivation to carry hope to others through our parish ministries ... we pray,
- For the people, places and experiences in our lives that bring us amazement and wonder even if we, like the women at the tomb, do not always understand the hand of God in what we see ... we pray,

Presider God of life, you sent your beloved Son to show us that death does not have the last word. On this feast of the Resurrection, grant us renewed faith and commitment to life in him. We ask this in the name of the risen Christ. Amen.

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