

## FEBRUARY 14TH, 2021: SIXTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

[Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46; I Corinthians 10:31-11:1; Mark 1:40-45](#)

Paul's words to the Corinthians should ring throughout today's liturgy: "... I try to please everyone in every way, not seeking my own benefit but that of the many ..." As other Christs, our actions are geared to helping others, not doing things for our own advantage. Pope Francis says it well: "We should be building bridges, not walls."

We live in a world in which we're convinced walls help us personally much better than bridges. That's especially true when it comes to those we fear. And as we hear in our Leviticus reading, no one in the ancient world was feared more than a leper.

Leprosy back then was defined as any destructive skin condition. Though people knew nothing of germs, they were convinced a demon of leprosy had taken control of the afflicted person, a demon which could jump from person to person if someone was foolish enough to get close to the leper. One's life was altered forever if he or she was declared a leper. (Though the 50s movie Ben Hur wasn't historical, most historians believe the Jerusalem village of lepers it depicted was fairly accurate--a hell on earth.) That's why only a priest could officially proclaim someone leprous. No "anonymous" accusations. Consequences were devastating.

Mark composed today's pericope against this background. Read it carefully. Not only does Jesus cure the leper and send him to the priests for verification, he breaks the Levitical regulations and actually "touches" him before he heals him.

Two other things about the passage. First, we're still in chapter 1 of Mark. The evangelist continues to tell his readers what evils Jesus' followers should be eradicating. Obviously the "outcasts" around us are one of those evils. In Jesus' faith, no one was out; everyone was in. He expects his followers to constantly reach out, not cut off.

Second, the phrase "moved with pity" replaced the evangelist's original phrase "moved with anger." Textual critics tell us not only that the latter wording is found in the best Marcan manuscripts but that it's easier to see how a scribe would change anger to pity than pity to anger. After all, we're dealing with Jesus of Nazareth. The question is, "Why's Jesus angry?"

He doesn't seem to be angry with the leper; rather, according to most scholars, he's uptight with a frame of mind which created an environment in which such people are officially walled off from everyone else. For me to succeed, some individuals must be permanently out of my life.

According to our sacred authors, both the historical and risen Jesus envision a different world, a place in which we demonstrate our belief in God being one with us by becoming one with all those around us, especially those whom society has barred from being part of "our world."

As we know from Matthew 23, Jesus' early followers pictured the church as the place where such unity should begin; a place where there's no honorary titles to divide us or social status to separate us. But then . . . somebody created clergy and laity. We've never been the same since.

Don't let anyone tell you not to be angry over what we've created of Jesus' church. According to Mark, Jesus was frequently angry when he shared his vision with his followers. (Check the other five or six places in his gospel where he depicts an angry Jesus.) Some things are worth getting emotional about.

Walls only come down when we actually tear them down. They normally don't fall down on their own. No wonder Mark places such a disturbing action at the beginning of his gospel. That's where Jesus believes it belongs — at the start of his good news.

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02/21/2021

## FEBRUARY 21ST, 2021: FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

### Genesis 9:8-15; I Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:12-15

Though today's Genesis passage mentions the Bible's first covenant, I'm afraid some of us Catholics don't know the first thing about Scriptural covenants. We've heard the word and know it has something to do with "things" between us and God, but that's about as far as we go.

Covenants are at the heart of both biblical theology and our liturgical practices. The reason, for instance, we take from the cup during the Eucharist revolves around a covenant Jesus presumes we've made with him. A covenant was also why the early church originally didn't permit non-Jews to become Christians.

A covenant is basically an agreement, usually between two or more parties. (Although today's covenant with Noah and his family is made solely by Yahweh.) It's similar to contracts people enter into with one another. Each covenant has two main elements: the parties enter into it freely, and each accepts the responsibilities the agreement demands. Every semester, for instance, I sign a contract with the community college at which I teach. I agree to the terms the college sets forth for its employees — spend X number of hours in the classroom, regularly evaluate my students, and present my subject in a scholarly way. On the college's part, it agrees to pay me the ultra-low wages adjunct professors earn at many such institutions.

The most frequently entered into covenant in our culture is marriage.

Knowing these basics about covenants, it's significant the original Israelites go against the practices of their pagan neighbors and conceive of their unique relationship with Yahweh as a covenant agreement. God has responsibilities; they have responsibilities. They have certain things they can expect from Yahweh; Yahweh has certain things he/she can expect from them. Neither can treat the other at whim.

In the case of Noah and his family, Yahweh is bound by his responsibility never again to send "a flood to destroy all mortal beings." And as most covenants have an outward sign to show the parties have entered into the agreement — a wedding ring in the case of marriage — Yahweh makes the rainbow the outward sign the earth won't again have to worry about such a disaster.

There are various Yahweh/Israelite covenants throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. Abraham makes an initial one in Genesis 15, and later, Moses, in the name of all Israelites, enters into the most famous of all biblical covenants on Mt. Sinai.

The unknown author of I Peter understands that Jesus has modified those standard Jewish covenants to include dying and rising with him. If we fulfill our responsibility to die for others in the ways he died for others, he's "obligated" to give us a share in the same life he achieved.

Mark's Jesus, on the other hand, doesn't seem too interested in that new life taking place only after our physical deaths. He's concerned with the unique life Jesus offers us here and now. Scholars are convinced the "kingdom of God" Jesus wants his followers to join him in experiencing revolves around God being present and working effectively in our everyday lives. But in order to reach that point, we must also join him in "repenting:" in doing a 180-degree switch in our value system.

Most of us don't realize we have a covenant responsibility to constantly change the way we look at people and situations around us. Such a readjustment of our values isn't something we do for "extra credit;" it's at the heart of our faith. Each of us agreed to that responsibility either at our baptism or when we first made a free choice of accepting the faith of Jesus.

One of these days we'll explore the outward sign of Jesus' covenant — receiving from the Eucharistic cup. Until then . . .

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## FEBRUARY 28TH, 2021: SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

[Genesis 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18; Romans 8:31b-34; Mark 9:2-10](#)

Many regard today's second reading as Yahweh's crudest biblical trick. How can any god command a father kill his son, then only tell him he was "kidding" just before he strikes the fatal blow? There must be more here than meets the eye. Why is such a narrative even in Scripture?

It's important to know this passage comes from the "Elohist" source: an oral tradition written down in the Northern half of the Holy Land in the middle of the 8th century BCE. The authors of this particular source seem to have been prophets, disturbed by constant pagan pressures inflicted on their readers.

Many of these non-Jewish people actually sacrificed their children to the fertility gods and goddesses they worshiped, often taunting their Israelite neighbors that such atrocious practices proved they were more dedicated to their deities than the Israelites were dedicated to Yahweh. This is where the Elohist author seems to step in.

This prophetic writer creates a story with which all his readers agree: if Yahweh were to actually demand they sacrifice their children, they would do so, no matter the cost. But the writer reinforces their belief in Yahweh as a God of life by reminding them they're to "redeem" any child they'd sacrifice with an animal. Today's narrative is the "official explanation" of that practice. In Abraham's case, Isaac is redeemed with a ram. (Remember, Joseph and Mary redeemed Jesus with some pigeons.)

In narrating this story, the Elohist author is more interested in Abraham's dedication to Yahweh than in the psychological harm such a scenario can inflict on the participants. Though most of us today go beyond the writer's focus and zero in on other aspects of the narrative, as good "exegetes" we have to see the event through his eyes, not ours.

Abraham, as the first Jew, sets the example for all other Jews. He's depicted as someone totally loyal to Yahweh. The constant intent to do whatever Yahweh wants is what sets him and his descendants apart from all others. Certainly makes them "holy," deeply different from those around them.

Each of us is somehow changed by the relationships we form. Every time this happens we become a different person. Nowhere is this more the case than in our relationships with Yahweh and the risen Jesus. Abraham becomes the initial member of Yahweh's Chosen People; and all other Christs become the new creation their mentor has become.

It's important to keep the latter in mind when we hear today's transfiguration pericope. Not only is Jesus transfigured, Mark presumes everyone who imitates Jesus' dying and rising is also transfigured. It's possible the evangelist actually began his transfiguration narrative by first reflecting on what happened to him once he dedicated himself to following Jesus of Nazareth. If he's been transfigured in the imitation process, then Jesus also must have been transfigured when he began the process. The link can't be broken. What happens to Jesus happens to us, and *vice versa*.

Paul realizes our commitment to the risen Jesus is the most important aspect of our lives. He reminds the church in Rome that their unique relationship guarantees they'll experience a "fearless" life. "If God is for us," he writes, "who can be against us? . . . Who will bring a charge against God's chosen ones? It is God who acquits us." No one can do better.

The Elohist writer, along with his fellow sacred authors, is convinced Yahweh is a God of life. But he's also convinced the only way to get the most out of life is to give ourselves over to Yahweh. It's by sacrificing ourselves to his/her will that we'll actually reach the depth of that life, no matter the cost.

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## MARCH 7TH, 2021: THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

[Exodus 20:1-17; I Corinthians 1:22-25; John 2:13-25](#)

I once asked a rabbi friend what he thought of the commotion over public displays of the Ten Commandments. He just smiled and answered as I thought he would. “Those commandments are our responsibilities,” he said, “not yours. But we Jews appreciate all the free publicity we’re getting.”

The commandments contained in today’s Exodus reading are part of the 613 covenant regulations the ancient Israelites agreed to on Mt. Sinai. If you’re Jewish, these laws are some of the responsibilities your ancestors swore to keep because of their relationship with Yahweh. Should you decide to be part of that 2,300 year old covenant, these 613 commandments are also your responsibilities, even today.

One of the biggest questions facing earliest Christians revolved around whether a non-Jewish convert to Jesus’s faith had to follow the Sinai covenant before he or she could be another Christ. In other words, did they have to be Jews before they could be Christians?

Paul of Tarsus answered “No!” to that question. He reminded his readers that Abraham — in Genesis 15:6 - had made a covenant with Yahweh at least 400 years before Moses entered into that more famous one on Mt. Sinai. That original covenant mentioned nothing about 613 regulations. It simply committed Abraham to “put his faith” in Yahweh, something Gentiles could do without actually becoming Jews. As long as they concurred with Abraham’s commitment, they were children of Abraham. The church could demand nothing more of them.

But as compelling as Paul’s argument, the question never went away during his lifetime. We need only read his letter to the Galatians in which he not only tells his “Judaizing” adversaries to be the first to be circumcised but also “prays the knife slips!” And, according to some scholars (like Garry Wills), his “liberal” answer to the Jew/Gentile question eventually leads to his martyrdom.

The Apostle is convinced the faith of Jesus adds something to Judaism, else his death and resurrection is meaningless. Jesus’ earthly ministry would have simply revolved around keeping those 613 laws, no more. That’s why he mentions his insight into the general Jewish rejection of the covenant Jesus lived and taught. As he reminds the Corinthians, it’s a “stumbling block” to many of the Chosen People. Jesus’ dying for others isn’t a sign of his strength. On the contrary, for them it’s a sign of his weakness. Yet in Paul’s experience, those willing to become weak by engaging in such self-giving will eventually achieve a life the Sinai participants could never attain by just keeping the Ten Commandments.

By the time John writes his gospel in the mid-90s, the split between Christianity and Judaism has become a huge gulf. The theme song running throughout the fourth gospel is “Anything You Can Do, I Can Do Better.” The “You” refers to Jews; the “I” to Christians. The evangelist’s first miracle, which precedes today’s pericope, initially demonstrates how the wine of Christianity replaces the water of Judaism.

Here John’s Jesus proclaims he’s replacing that great Jewish institution — the Jerusalem temple — with himself. Throughout the passage he speaks about “the temple of his body.”

John and Paul would have been amazed the classic double-tablet symbol of Israel’s covenant, the Ten Commandments, is so frequently displayed in Christian settings . . . even in churches. As my rabbi friend stated, “That’s not your covenant.”

Yet few Christians have any idea in what our covenant with Jesus consists; nor can we click off our responsibilities. Almost never have I seen symbols of that particular agreement.

Best we “hang in there” until Holy Thursday. Our covenant — and the outward symbol of it — will be front and center during that specific celebration. We need lots of publicity for it, though it’s anything but free.

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## MARCH 14TH, 2021: FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

[II Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23; Ephesians 2:4-10; John 3:14-21](#)

At times I'm criticized for giving "depressing" homilies. Probably a valid critique. I suppose one reason for my bleak approach to preaching is that I try to give homilies based on the Scripture readings of the day. As any serious student of the Bible knows, our sacred authors are normally motivated to write only when they surface problems in their communities. Rarely do any of these unique individuals sit down on a beautiful, sunny day, no care in the world, put stylus to papyrus and produce an inspired work.

Should they have background music playing as they write, I'm certain it would be a specific cut from The Music Man: "Trouble, trouble, trouble! We got trouble right here in . . . ."

Our Chronicles author leaves no doubt about the trouble he's facing. Though the Chosen People have recently been freed from their Babylonian Exile, many in his community seem to have forgotten what originally triggered that nation-changing experience. He clicks off their offenses. Turning from Yahweh, practicing idolatry, introducing pagan worship in the Jerusalem temple are just a few of their blatant sins. But the most horrendous of their transgressions is one we Catholics were never taught to confess: ignoring and mocking the prophets in their midst. They ". . . scoffed at Yahweh's prophets, until the anger of Yahweh against his people was so inflamed that there was no remedy."

Accustomed to obeying canon law, papal decrees, and episcopal regulations, we easily forget the normal way God's will is discovered in Scripture is by surfacing and obeying the prophets God continually sends to us. Not knowing the five (or six) rules for distinguishing real prophets from fake prophets is as inexcusable as not knowing the difference between mortal and venial sin. Yet I'd hate to give an exam on the former to a normal Sunday Mass crowd. (By the way, rarely are any religious institution's administrators prophetic. According to Paul of Tarsus, prophecy and administration are two distinct gifts of the Spirit, almost never given to the same person. Prophets usually make lousy administrators; administrators, lousy prophets.)

The Pauline disciple responsible for Ephesians addresses a different problem. Seems some in his community are looking at salvation as something they've accomplished through their own actions; not something the risen Jesus freely offers. He reminds his readers, "By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God; it is not from works, so no one may boast." Our good works don't cause salvation, they're simply the things saved people do. Of course, as the late Marcus Borg pointed out in Speaking Christian, biblical salvation doesn't refer primarily to "getting into heaven." It's a much broader concept.

John agrees. He points out in today's gospel pericope, that eternal life isn't an experience which begins after our physical death; it's already starting right here and now. The evangelist struggles against those who believe "the light" is still in the future. For those who believe, it's already at work in their daily lives.

One last point. Notice what our Chronicles author says about Cyrus. Though this 6 th century BCE Persian king isn't even Jewish, he's the person Yahweh has designated to liberate the Chosen People from the Babylonian Exile.

One constant message of biblical prophets — one with which conservatives have huge problems — is that God can work in our lives in many different ways through many different people.

I once asked Carroll Stuhlmueller about his view of current prophets. Refusing to share his list, he replied, "If I told you, and my names ever got out, I'd never again be permitted in any Catholic pulpit for the rest of my life!"

Now that's a problem!

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## MARCH 21ST, 2021: FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

[Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 5:7-9; John 12:20-33](#)

Why do we belong to organized religions? Though it flies in the face of popular religion, neither Yahweh in the Hebrew Scriptures nor Jesus in the Christian Scriptures directly command us to do so. Our sacred authors presume we've committed ourselves to being disciples of Yahweh or the risen Jesus, and have sealed our commitment with various covenants, but in none of those agreements are we expected to join a specific religion.

Scholars tell us that organized religions came into existence for one basic reason: to help us have an experience of God in our lives. By regularly joining together with others who've made the same commitments, it should be easier to surface the divine around and in us. The late Ed Hays once remarked, "Objectively we could do everything the risen Jesus expects of us without being a church member. But practically few of us can pull that off by ourselves. Organized religion is essential for the vast majority of Christians."

The concept of church membership comes into play today because of Yahweh's promise in our Jeremiah reading to . . . "make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah." This agreement, unlike the Sinai covenant, will be placed within them, written on their hearts, no longer just inscribed on stone tablets. "All, from least to greatest, shall know me," says Yahweh.

In Hebrew, to "know" someone or something means more than just having an intellectual familiarity with the thing or person, it means to actually experience that someone or something. (When talking about knowing someone of the opposite sex, it usually means to have intercourse . . . as in the Genesis genealogies, and in Luke when Mary tells Gabriel, "I do not know man.")

In Jeremiah's covenant context, the prophet is convinced the deeper one's commitment to Yahweh becomes, the deeper one will experience Yahweh in the depth of his or her being.

The authors of our Christian Scriptures agree. But their road to having that experience runs through Jesus of Nazareth. If we're to experience God in our daily lives, we must do what the historical Jesus did to experience God in his daily life.

Our unknown Hebrews writer hits the nail on the head. Like Jesus, we must first learn obedience through suffering. We don't find God's presence by walking into a magnificent cathedral, or listening to a majestic organ recital. God only becomes present when we generously give ourselves to others. Only those who imitate his painful giving will experience his God in their lives.

John's Jesus agrees. In one of Scriptures best-known lines, he reminds his followers of something all farmers know but rarely apply to their personal lives. "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit." Life only comes from death.

But he also shares his personal history of surfacing God: "Whoever loves his life loses it, but whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life." Since for John, eternal life begins right here and now, we're already experiencing God long before we step through the pearly gates.

I'm afraid, as necessary as they are, many of our religious institutions only provide us with an experience of the religious institution. They rarely give us opportunities to die enough to ourselves to provide us with an experience of God in our lives. Were these institutions more welcoming communities and actually developed ministries, for instance, to women, children and LBGT individuals, instead of building cathedrals, perhaps we really could do what God intends us to do. They'd be providing us with occasions to experience the kind of death Jesus experienced.

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## MARCH 28TH, 2021: PALM SUNDAY

[Isaiah 50:4-7; Philippians 2:6-11; Mark 14:1-15:47](#)

Every Palm Sunday I recall the old joke (I first heard it in high school) of the Hispanic man who attends his first major league baseball game. Returning home, his family, anxious to hear about his experience, asks, “How did they treat you?” “They couldn’t have been nicer,” he replies. “For instance, before the game started everyone stood up and asked, ‘Jose, can you see?’”

In some sense, that’s exactly what happened to Jesus on the original Palm Sunday.

Historically, it’s the Sunday before Passover; pilgrims by the thousands are coming into Jerusalem. To assure an instant, panoramic view of the Holy City, many enter by coming into town over the Mount of Olives, singing pilgrimage psalms as they process. One of the most popular songs is Psalm 118, with the refrain, “Blessings on the one who comes in the name of Yahweh.” Some might tear off olive branches, even throw down and walk on their cloaks to transform a simple rural road into a “via sacra.” (My old St. Louis U. prof., Dr. Irvin Arkin, once claimed there were actual records of ancient lawsuits filed by the Mount’s olive growers against the temple priests because their groves were being devastated by pilgrims every high holy day.)

With or without a donkey, Jesus’ pilgrimage group could have been one of at least two dozen coming into Jerusalem on that particular Sunday, all in the same way. The only difference, his followers eventually realized that this time someone actually was coming in Yahweh’s name. When it originally took place, Jesus was just an indistinguishable pilgrim; one of thousands. Few noticed any uniqueness in his arrival; certainly wouldn’t have interpreted the event as our evangelists later did.

But adding the donkey leads Jesus’ followers to zero in on something many of us miss. Those Jerusalemites who at the time of Jesus were expecting a Messiah, were anticipating a very distinctive Messiah; a military leader who would liberate Israel from Roman occupation. That Messiah would ride a horse, not a donkey. Jesus’ mode of transportation during his pilgrimage entrance into the city gave a message most Israelites would have rejected. It might have been good news that the Messiah’s arriving; bad news that he’s riding a donkey. Only after his resurrection would his followers put the pieces together.

In the meantime, we presume this itinerant preacher from Capernaum identifies with Deutero-Isaiah, the author of today’s first reading. He, like the prophet, is determined to wake up each morning, listening for Yahweh’s word that day, even if that word brings him “buffets and spitting.” He hears things other people ignore. Yet, as Paul reminds the Philippians, that word always demands he “empty” himself, that he become completely one with those around him.

That’s why there’s so little physical suffering in Mark’s Passion Narrative. I have no doubt Jesus encountered great physical pain on Holy Thursday and Good Friday. Yet the evangelist writes his Passion/Resurrection Narrative with his readers in mind — those with whom Jesus becomes one - people who aren’t going to encounter much physical suffering in their lives. As Jesus became one with us, we’re to become one with him, to suffer and die with him so we can also live with him.

But, almost always, our suffering is more psychological than physical. We, like Jesus, are frequently misunderstood, friends desert, even “betray” us. In those painful moments, we’re still called to imitate Jesus and give ourselves by constantly becoming one with those who hurt us.

If a gospel Passion Narrative doesn’t even mention that Jesus was actually nailed to the cross, the author must be looking at Jesus’ crucifixion from a unique perspective; a perspective which demands we look at him and ourselves as unique, even in a crowd.

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## APRIL 1ST, 2021: EUCHARIST OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

[Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14; I Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-15](#)

That some Catholics still insist on receiving communion on their tongues creates problems for me. It's obvious they don't understand what we're celebrating tonight.

I clearly remember my 1947 first communion. Some of our religion teachers back then still considered us part of the "experiment" Pius X started in 1910 when he lowered the first communion age from 12 to 7. This controversial pope — who, if reigning today, certainly would condemn how I teach Scripture — removed almost all the "educational requirements" for first communicants, and demanded only that they distinguish Eucharistic bread from table bread. Since our parish employed flat, unleavened wafers, I passed that test every time. Jesus was only in that special kind of bread — the bread we never ate at supper.

Everything was directed toward the bread. We didn't dare look around, lest we break our concentration on it. When the decisive moment arrived for us to receive Jesus' body, we reverently folded our hands, put them under the communion rail cloth, stuck out our tongues, and swallowed the sacred wafer. It was debatable whether we should chew it or wait for it to dissolve. (Of course, the authentically pious — like myself — waited for it to dissolve.) We eventually returned to our place, heads down, and made our thanksgiving, never once diverting our eyes right or left.

Had Paul of Tarsus showed up at St. Mary's church on that overcast April morning, he would have turned to the person next to him and asked, "What's going on?" He couldn't have possibly recognized the Eucharistic action he refers to in today's I Corinthian pericope. The passage is highly significant; it's the earliest narrative of the Lord's Supper we have, predating the first gospel account by at least ten years.

If we start that Corinthian passage just a few verses before our liturgical reading, and end it a few verses beyond, the context will be evident. Paul isn't worried about some in his community disrespecting the risen Jesus in the bread and wine; he's concerned about them being disrespectful to the risen Jesus in one another. Those people who we were once warned — under pain of venial sin - to ignore as we received communion are precisely the people on whom the Apostle expects us to concentrate. Pius X wanted us to distinguish one kind of bread from another; Paul wants us to distinguish one community from another. One is just an ordinary gathering of people, like passengers on a plane; the other, during the Eucharist, is the Body of Christ.

Jesus refers to the agreement his Jewish ancestors made with Yahweh on Mt. Sinai when he says, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." Just as those runaway slaves were sprinkled with blood to show they'd made the covenant with Yahweh, so Jesus' followers will drink his blood to show they've made a covenant with him to carry on his ministry. They've actually become other Christs.

Blood, as we hear in tonight's first reading, is the biblical symbol of life. Just as the Israelites are saved by the lamb's blood on the doorpost, so we're saved by the life-giving blood of Jesus. But we don't sprinkle it; we drink it. Taking from the cup is the outward sign - instituted by Jesus - that we're determined to carry on Jesus' ministry. Just as married couples wear wedding rings as signs they're committed to one another, so we drink from the cup as a sign we're committed to the risen Jesus.

Of course, as tonight's Gospel shows, that commitment revolves around giving ourselves to others, even to the point of becoming their foot washers. After all, when we wash their feet, we're actually washing Jesus' feet. Not bad for amateur foot washers!

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## APRIL 3RD, 2021: EASTER VIGIL (night of 4/3)

[Exodus 14:15-15:1; Isaiah 55:1-11; Romans 6:3-11; Mark 16:1-7](#)

Ideally all 9 readings should be proclaimed tonight, but because of space limits I can only comment on 4.

Tonight we're reflecting more on our own death and resurrection than we're reflecting on the historical Jesus' death and resurrection. If we haven't personally died and risen, there's no reason to celebrate Easter. These readings only make sense when we listen to them through the filter of our own experiences.

The entire celebration revolves around Paul's reminder to the Romans, "... We who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death. . . . If we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him."

When Paul originally wrote these words, he didn't envision baptism as just pouring a few drops of water over someone's forehead. Baptism in his day was administered by immersion. Catechumens were totally dunked under the water, then raised up; an outward sign of dying, being buried, and rising with Jesus. As with all sacraments, what happens outside symbolizes what's happening inside.

The key is that, like Jesus, one must really be dead before one can rise. As John's Jesus states in chapter 12, "Only when the grain of wheat dies will it produce fruit." That's why these specific women are at the tomb. In Mark's gospel they alone actually saw Jesus die. Had they not initially experienced his death they wouldn't have been the first to experience his resurrection.

They'll eventually understand they're not dealing with a resuscitation. The historical Jesus doesn't simply start breathing again. When Paul experienced the "Christ" on the Damascus road, he experienced a whole "new creation," no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. As he later told his community in Galatia, he'd never before experienced anyone quite like him/her.

The essential thing about Jesus' followers is that those who, like him, die by giving themselves to those around them also rise into new creations. That's why, as we learned in catechism class, no one should confess sins they've committed before baptism. It isn't just that baptism washed away those sins; a different person committed those sins, a person who died.

Just as the ancient Israelites became a new people by crossing through the sea during the Exodus, so we became a new people when we were submerged in the waters of baptism. A group of runaway slaves became the Chosen People when they stepped into the sea; we became other Christs when we stepped into our baptismal water.

Our newness is something on which we can constantly reflect. We never run out of possibilities, never have a shortage of ideas. We're always acquiring new insights. That's why Isaiah 55 is a unique reading for this unique night. Deutero-Isaiah's disciples deliberately chose to end their 16 chapter collection of his oracles in this way; mentioning experiences on which, 500 years after their mentor's death, even other Christs can reflect.

We who've imitated Jesus' death and resurrection know what it's like to actually have a deep thirst quenched, a thirst many of us didn't even notice until this Galilean carpenter became part of our lives. Because of his/her presence, we daily experience someone who simultaneously is so near to us that we can't imagine how we existed before, yet who is also as far away from us as the heavens are above the earth. Part of our dying/rising is a commitment to live our lives in the midst of such contradictions.

We have no choice but to constantly fall back on God's word in our life. Deutero-Isaiah was convinced that as soon as Yahweh says something, it happens. This night of all nights is the best occasion to surface what the risen Jesus is saying in my life. If we don't know, we simply haven't been listening.

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APRIL 4, 2021: EASTER SUNDAY

Acts 10:14a, 37-43 Colossians 3:1-4 John 20:1-9

It's important to realize that it took time for those who originally discovered Jesus' empty tomb to understand its significance. Though our four evangelists employ the oft-used biblical literary device of having angels provide that significance to us the readers, we can't presume the original participants were so fortunate as to have "everything" explained on the spot. The tradition behind John 21, for instance, presumes Jesus' disciples returned to Galilee and moped around for days before they finally returned to fishing and discovered that Jesus was not only alive but risen, making breakfast for them on the seashore.

Normally Simon Peter is the one credited with being the first to realize the empty tomb meant Jesus had risen from the dead. (That's one of the reasons the early Christian community was convinced its faith was built on the rock of Peter's faith.) But today's gospel pericope gives us a different theology. The Beloved Disciple and Peter simultaneously receive Mary Magdala's message that Jesus' body is no longer in the tomb. Though the former beats the latter to the burial place, the Beloved Disciple, honoring part of the tradition, steps aside and lets Peter go into the tomb first. Yet it's important to note the evangelist states that it was this "other disciple," not Peter, who first "saw and believed."

What's with this Beloved Disciple who often stands out in contrast to Peter in John's gospel? Scholars no longer believe he's the gospel's author. Instead, most contend he was one of the historical Jesus' unnamed disciples, the person who initially evangelized the community for whom this gospel was written. Since he played an essential role in their faith lives, he's given important roles in their gospel. He, for instance, is the one who rests his head on Jesus' chest during the Last Supper, later follows him to Golgotha and receives the commission to care for Jesus' mother.

In a very real sense he's someone who not only came to believe in Jesus' resurrection but was able to help his community achieve that same faith. No wonder the late Raymond Brown entitled his classic book on the Johannine writings, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*. There would have been no such community, nor a fourth gospel, if that particular disciple hadn't eventually realized the meaning of Jesus' empty tomb.

All our biblical Christian writings depend on a resurrected-Jesus interpretation of his missing body. If someone had stolen the body or Mary and her companions simply went to the wrong tomb that morning, the Pauline disciple responsible for the letter to the Colossians could never have encouraged his readers to die with Jesus. There would have been no reason for them to "think of what is above." Neither could Luke's Peter have assured his listeners in today's first reading that "everyone who believes in him (Jesus) will receive forgiveness of sins through his name." That forgiveness didn't happen because they went to confession, but because, by imitating Jesus' death and resurrection, they, like he, became a new creation. They didn't even have to confess those sins. The person who had committed them had died, and a new person had come into existence.

Just as I presume it took Jesus' original followers a long time to appreciate the implications of his empty tomb, so I presume some of us today might not yet have achieved that insight. We do what he asks because we want to get into heaven. But to actually experience him alive and working effectively in our daily lives might still be something down the road.

What a happy irony if we actually came to understand those implications during today's celebration of Easter.

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