

## Homily for Holy Thursday 2007

The scriptures tell us

that as late as the morning of the day before Jesus died,  
his disciples had not yet determined  
where they would have their Passover celebration.

They asked Jesus for help with this question

and he directed them to the upper room of a house  
owned by a man they did not know.

Sometimes, last minute plans turn out to be the best...

There, in that upper room, some simple events took place

that have never ceased to echo in the hearts of Christians  
for nearly 2,000 years:

events that echo in our song and prayer and ritual tonight.

As the apostles made their way to the upper room that night

they walked the streets of Jerusalem  
which were dirt, littered with garbage and waste.

The need to wash one's feet,

particularly for a meal where it was expected that the guests  
would sit on the floor around a low table,  
was real and great.

This surely was a servant's job and the Servant of us all  
showed us how to do it.

The foot washing Jesus offered served a real need

but it is important to note that he did this "*during* the supper."

Jesus *interrupts* the ancient and sacred Passover ritual  
and does what no one present expects him to do.

That Jesus appears to make this a *part* of the ritual

tells us that his intentions are not only practical  
but also generously revealing of the mercy and forgiveness he offers.

In biblical times, hands and feet were parts of the body  
understood to symbolize human activity:

to wash these parts was to wash away any offensive deeds  
performed by these appendages.

Thus sayings like, "I wash my hands of this..."

When Jesus instructs the 12 to wash one another's feet

he invites them not only to humble service of one another  
but also to mutual forgiveness.

Just as the first Passover sacrifice

mercifully spared the Israelites,

so does the new covenant in the blood of the Lamb

mercifully wash away our sins,  
as one washes the feet of one's neighbor.

And tonight, what Jesus said and did in that upper room

echoes in our Passover celebration  
for we gather here for nothing less than remembering Christ,  
our Passover Lamb who was sacrificed for us,  
who washes us in his mercy, and who is our lasting peace.

As we wash each other's feet tonight, in the middle of our Passover meal,  
we would do well ask ourselves,  
"How freely do we interrupt the ritual of our daily lives,  
the ritual of our jobs and careers,  
the ritual of our relationship to the church,  
the ritual of our own plans and desires -  
how freely do we interrupt all these to serve those around us  
and to wash with the mercy which is ours to give  
those who have offended and 'trespassed against us?'"

The Lord's Supper then feeds us with his mercy  
not only in his body and blood which we share  
from the table of his sacrifice,  
but also in the humble service he offers us and calls us to imitate  
in the washing of feet.  
We are both fed *by* and washed *in* the blood of the Lamb of God,  
Christ Jesus, our Passover and our lasting peace.

May the word and work of Christ's love  
continue to echo in our prayer this night  
and in our lives each day.

*Rev. Austin Fleming*

*(sung) Oh-o-o-o, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble...  
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*

**"Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble..."  
Is that so?**

**Does the thought of Jesus suffering and dying for *my sins*,  
sometimes cause me to "tremble, tremble, tremble?"**

**How do we understand the story we have all just heard?  
Is it just a story, even if a *true* story?  
Is it simply a moving account of one man's  
extraordinary goodness?**

**Have I only *heard* the story - second-hand,  
or, *WAS I THERE* when they crucified my Lord?**

**Were *YOU* there when they crucified the Lord?  
*I* was there... and *YOU* were there...**

**at least our *SINS* were there:  
every failure of ours to love God  
and to love our neighbor as ourselves;  
every failure of ours to live according to the Lord's word;  
every failure of ours to do what is just and to make peace -  
all of this, which is part-of-all of-us,  
was *there* -when they crucified our Lord.**

**We were there as God's people.  
We were there as sinful individuals  
and we were there as a sinful church  
ever in need of God's mercy and healing.**

**Jesus, the Christ, our Passover Lamb,  
took upon his innocent shoulders  
the sin of every time we have settled  
for anything less than what is true, just and good;  
the sin of every time we have settled  
for anything less than what is real, pure and beautiful;  
for anything less than what is life-giving, nurturing and loving;  
the sin of every time we have put ourselves first, ahead of others;  
every time we have forgotten the poor  
while we ourselves have more than we need;  
every time we have excluded and marginalized others;  
every time we have taken for granted all that we have.**

**I was there, you were there, the church was there,  
when they crucified our Lord  
because he took on his shoulders all our sins:  
the ones we remember;  
the ones we have forgotten;  
and even the sins we have not yet committed  
- but surely will.**

*(sung) Oh-o-o-o, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble...  
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*

*(POINT to CRUCIFIX)*

**Look! There is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!**

**"Oh God of love and mercy:**

**you are always ready to forgive.**

**Time and time again we broke your covenant**

**but you did not abandon us.**

**Instead, through your Son, Jesus,**

**you bound yourself even more closely to the human family  
by a bond that can never be broken.**

**When we were lost and could not find the way to you,**

**you loved us more than ever.**

**Jesus, innocent and without sin, gave himself into our hands**

**and was nailed to a cross..." for our sins. (*Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation I*)**

**For our sins: yours, and mine, and the sins of the world -**

**Jesus suffered, and he died.**

*(sung) Oh-o-o-o, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble...  
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*

**We do not remember these things to make us feel**

**guilty, or sad, or uncomfortable.**

**We remember these things so that some time,**

**at least once, that some time we might *tremble, tremble, tremble,***

**as we ponder the weight of our sins on his shoulders**

**and come then to *GLORY* in the cross of Jesus**

**who is our salvation, our hope, our peace and our life.**

**For how shall we ever know**

**the victory of the cross, the bitter-sweet *gift* of the cross,**

**unless first we understand**

**the love with which Jesus shouldered our sins and our burdens  
and laid down his life for us, his friends:**

**his unfaithful friends, his redeemed friends.**

*(sung) Oh-o-o-o, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble...  
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*

**O Jesus: You are our Passover, our lasting peace.**

**You are the lamb, slain for us, that the angel of death might spare us,**

**finding us washed in your blood,**

**marked as those who have been saved for everlasting life.**

**What shall we render to you, Lord,**

**what shall offer in return for such undeserved mercy?**

**We give you *GLORY* - brother who suffered for us all,**



and Ken was explaining to Alex how we believe  
that after Jesus suffered and died, he rose from the dead  
and ascended into heaven to be with his Father.

Alex thought this over for a moment, looked at his dad and said,  
"And you know this - HOW?"

Alex's question is a good one!

We are all here on Easter

to celebrate the Resurrection of Christ from the dead  
and we might well turn to each other and ask,  
"And you know this - HOW?"

How do YOU know that Christ rose from the dead?

The simplest answer, of course, is: "Someone told me..."

Who told *you* that Jesus rose from the dead?

Chances are, it was your parents, just as Alex's dad told him.

And chances are that your parents first heard it from your grandparents.

If we trace the line of people who told others about the Resurrection

then we would eventually make our way back to the tomb of Jesus  
where "two men in dazzling garments"

told Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Mary the mother of James,  
"He has been raised, he is not here:

why do you seek the living one among the dead?"

And the three women returned to the apostles

and told them that Jesus had risen from the dead.

And do you know what? It almost ended there!

The apostles didn't believe the women -  
they said their story was nonsense.

But Peter ran to the tomb and he became a believer

and then he came back and told others,

who told others, who told others, who told others...

until finally someone told you and someone told me,  
and just recently, Ken told Alex....

And oh, there's so much more here

than just a report about an empty tomb!

Tombs can be empty for many reasons

and the only thing an empty tomb proves  
is that a body is no longer there.

Beyond the empty tomb,

Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene, and Peter,

and the apostles-including-doubting-Thomas,

and two disciples on the road to Emmaus,

and once to a crowd of over 500.

Far more important than the empty tomb (an experience of emptiness)

was the *fullness* of Christ's presence

experienced by those to whom he appeared.

And having MET the Risen Jesus,  
they told others, who told others... who told you and me.

In our own times and in our culture  
we aren't easily given to taking things as truth  
- just on the word of others.

We are skeptics. We want proof. We demand documentation.  
We want to see for ourselves.

Yes. *We want to see for ourselves...*

And *that's* what Easter is all about.

Easter is a time for us to ask NOT

"Who told us that Jesus rose from the dead?"

but rather a time to ask,

"Have WE seen the Risen Christ? Has he appeared to US?"

*We need to see for ourselves!*

If our faith is based on an empty tomb,

it is based on a void, an emptiness, a negative.

What we need are eyes, ears, minds, hands, arms and hearts OPEN

to the Jesus who appeared to his friends, as we read in the scriptures.

There is no one to whom the Risen Christ will not make himself known,  
although sometimes we are so focused on the void,  
on the negative, on the emptiness,  
that we fail to see him right before us, right beside us, right behind us.

In the scriptures Jesus appeared to the brave women  
who approached the Roman guards to visit the tomb  
so that they might anoint Christ's body:

in other words,

Jesus appeared to these women who expected to find his corpse,  
- not to meet him alive.

They came in grief over their loss, not in faith in the resurrection.

And Jesus appeared to his friends who were cowardly huddled in fear  
behind locked doors having denied and abandoned him, only hours before...

And Jesus appeared to those two on the road to Emmaus  
who were so busy about their own disappointment and concerns  
that they did not recognize him as he joined them  
and their conversation.

And he waits to meet each of us, too,  
for he does not ask us to rely emptiness for evidence,  
nor just on the hearsay of others,  
but rather the Risen Christ comes to us in our grief  
as he came to Mary Magdalene;  
he comes to us in our fears, anxieties and doubts  
as he came to the apostles;  
and he comes to us in our confusion

as he came as wisdom to the travelers along the road to Emmaus.

But we might have to roll away some stones  
that block us from meeting him,  
even as the stone sealing his tomb was rolled away.

If my heart is like stone  
the Risen Jesus will want to touch and heal it.

If my anger blinds me and keeps me from his body, the Church,  
he will want to help me see with eyes of renewed faith  
that the Church is his body.

If my selfishness turns me inward,  
he will want to pierce that by opening my heart to others.

If I've decided there's nothing new under the sun,  
he may need to rock my world  
in ways I do not expect or imagine - or want!

That we can reassure one another in faith  
by telling our children and each other that Jesus is risen  
is a great thing.

That we continue to hear his voice in the scriptures  
is a gift from God.

That we can meet the Risen Christ, especially in serving the poor,  
is an opportunity we do not often enough afford ourselves.

That we gather here at Easter and on every Sunday  
to celebrate the life and presence of the Risen Christ among us  
is a great blessing.

Just as the Risen Jesus quietly slipped into the lives  
of the earliest believers, so he slips in our lives today.

Jesus rose in quiet and silence,  
he rose from the dead in the dead of night,  
to live among us, day by day.

Where will his path cross ours today? this week?  
in the months, in the year ahead of us?

Will we know him when we meet him? Will we be looking for him?  
Will we welcome him when he comes?

That we might recognize him in our daily lives,  
he comes always to our table here  
appearing to us in the bread and wine of the Eucharist.

Meet him here, this morning,  
that you might be readied to meet him  
whenever and wherever he chooses to come to meet you.

