

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* by Raymond F. Collins.

While scholars and mystics appreciate the Fourth Gospel for its depth of theological and spiritual insight, preachers often find it a difficult gospel to preach. There are many reasons for this. Among them is that a good part of the gospel consists of extended discourses, whose several verses are intertwined with one another. Another is that the Fourth Gospel is replete with rich symbolism, which is sometimes difficult to understand. Still another reason why the gospel is so difficult to preach is the sometimes mystic heights to which it reaches. These receive symbolic expression in the eagle, long used as the symbol of the gospel’s anonymous and unknown author, popularly identified as “John.”

Apart from the summer-time use of John 6 in Cycle B, the Fourth Gospel does not appear in semi-continuous fashion in the church’s three-year cycle of Gospel readings. The Easter season does, however, allow the gospel to be proclaimed to our Christian faithful. This year the Johannine story of the woman caught in the act of adultery (John 8:1-11) serves as the gospel reading for the Fifth Sunday of Lent. All told, the coming Sundays--if the Easter vigil is to be included--provide us with six opportunities to preach on the Gospel according to John.

These Johannine readings provide us with a unique opportunity to see Jesus as the Beloved Disciple saw him. What a wonderful opportunity for us and our congregations to have, to fly on the wings of an eagle!

### **THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT**

March 3, 2013

#### *LITURGY:*

**Exodus 3:1-8a, 13-15** describes the call of Moses and God’s self-revelation to the leader of his people.

**1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12** contains Paul’s midrashic reflection on Israel’s Exodus experience.

**Luke 13:1-9** is a composite narrative containing several warnings to repent.

The evangelist begins with two examples that do not appear in the other Synoptic Gospels. Showing his interest in the history around Jesus, he uses two stories that illustrate the unexpectedness of death. Death, the first example shows, can even happen while people are participating in religious rituals. And death spares no one. That death comes unexpectedly to some does not mean that they are greater sinners than are other people. The unexpected nature of death warrants a call to be prepared; it calls for a person to repent (v. 3)

This first example mentions Pilate, the Roman governor, first introduced into the Lukan story at Luke 3:1. The specific incident graphically described by Luke is not otherwise attested in ancient sources, but the Roman governor was well-known as a fast-moving administrator who did not refrain from the use of violence in pursuit of his political aims, as was observed by the Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus (cf. *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.85-19; *Jewish War* 2, 169-177). The Lukan Jesus’ observation that Pilate acted violently towards Galileans prepares for the trial and consequent crucifixion of Jesus at Pilate’s hands (cf. Luke 23:2-25).

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The second story that illustrates just how unexpected death can be is one that speaks about another unlikely circumstance of death, a falling tower. Josephus does not mention the incident but he does tell his readers that the old wall of Jerusalem—not the modern wall built on order of the Ottoman Emperor, Suleiman I during the sixteenth century—was “above the fountain of Siloam” (*Jewish War* 5, 195). Reference to a tower at that site in the construction is not mentioned by Josephus but ancient cities typically had watch-towers and defensive parapets built on the city walls.

The gospel story conjures up the image of one such tower. According to the story, the falling tower resulted in the death of eighteen inhabitants of Jerusalem. As was the case with the first illustration, this second story (v. 4) is told to provide a setting for Jesus’ warning, “If you do not repent, you will all perish as they did” (v. 5). Once again, the story emphasizes that unexpected death does not discriminate between the guilty and the less guilty. The story’s mention of Siloam is one of two mentions of Siloam in the New Testament. The other is found in John 9:7, 11, when Jesus tells the man who had been blind from birth to go to the pool of Siloam—located in Jerusalem--and wash.

With the parable of the fig tree (vv. 6-9) Luke rejoins the triple tradition but his version of the story of the fig tree radically differs from that found in Matt 21:18-19 and Mark 11:12-14. In those stories a hungry Jesus cursed a fig tree on the outskirts of Jerusalem because it had no fruit for Jesus to eat. The Lukan version of the story of the fig tree is a parable that emphasizes the critical nature of human existence. God graciously grants a period of grace to human beings so that they can get their lives together and bear appropriate fruit. This period of grace may be extended but it is not unlimited; it will come to an end. There will come a moment when God’s judgment is definitive. Humans who do not produce appropriate fruit in their lives will be punished, just as an unfruitful fig tree is destined to be cut down.

#### ***BROKEN FOR US:***

The first two readings for this this third Sunday in Lent exploit the Lenten motif of the Exodus. The third reading consists of a repetitive call to repentance, a radical change in a person’s way of life (*metanoia*).

To our generation the story of a sturdy tower falling from the impressive wall that surrounded ancient Jerusalem cannot fail to evoke the memory of the twin towers that fell in New York on September 11, 2001. Thousands of people died unexpectedly that day, including not only those who were in the buildings but also the many first responders who were killed by falling debris.

Had they turned their lives to God? Were they ready for what happened to them on that fateful day? These are questions to ponder on this Third Sunday of Advent.

#### **FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT**

March 10, 2013

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*LITURGY:*

**Joshua 5:9a, 10-12** narrates the story of the celebration of Passover by Jews about to reenter the Promised Land.

**2 Corinthians 5:17-21** is a truly significant passage on Paul’s ministry of reconciliation.

**Luke 15:1-3, 11-32** contains the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). The reading begins a short introduction which, in its Lukan context, provides a setting for the three parables of lost and found that appear in Chapter 15. Today’s gospel lection omits the short parables of the lost sheep (Luke 15:4-7) and the lost coin (Luke 15:8-10). In the gospel narrative “this parable” is a reference to the parable of the lost sheep; in the truncated lection for today it allows the story of the Prodigal Son to be characterized as a parable. The setting reminds today’s reader of the sometimes uncomfortable fact that the religious leaders of Jesus’ day did not accept his role as the embodied sacrament of God’s mercy.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son, found only in Luke, is one of Jesus’ longest parables. Contemporary psychologists can find in the young man’s story the tale of many an adolescent’s quest for independence followed by a poignant tale of sibling rivalry. These psychological insights may help us to understand the story more completely but Jesus was not telling stories to illustrate psychological realities. Rather he wanted his listeners to understand the importance of repentance, the mercy of a gracious God, and the need to accept repentant sinners into one’s company.

The story begins with a man, the younger of two brothers asking his father for his share of the inheritance. The man did not have any legal right to the inheritance, whose distribution would have been regulated by the prescriptions of Lev 27:8-11 and 36:7-9. Rabbis, as good lawyers, discussed the meaning of these laws, as can be seen in the Mishnaic tracts, *Bekarot* “First Things” (*m. Bek.* (8:1-10) and *Baba Batra*, “the Last Gate” (*m. B. Bat.* 8:1-9:10).

As the story is told, the young man took what his father had given him and went to another locale, where he led the good life. Eventually misfortune overtook him. He ran out of money; a famine came upon the area. Destitute, he resorted to feeding pigs, considered by Jews to be a despicable form of employment. Pigs were unclean animals (Lev 11:7; 14:8). As for Jews, says the Mishnah’s tractate *Baba Qamma*, “The First Gate,” “none may rear swine anywhere” (*m. B. Qam.* 7:7). To this day pious Jews refrain from eating pork and pork products. Reduced to penury, the man decided to return home where he intended to acknowledge his fault and ask to be treated like one of the father’s hired hands.

In the second scene a concerned father saw his younger son from the distance. At once he was moved with compassion (cf. Luke 7:13; 10:33). Taking the initiative, he ran to his son and gave him a warm embrace. Virtually neglecting his son’s confession, he orders a celebration to begin (cf. Luke 15:6, 9). The idea of a son being dead and come to life again (vv. 24, 32) was bound to resonate with Luke’s Christian readers.

In the third scene of the short story, the older brother who had been out in the fields heard the sounds of rejoicing as he approached the house. One of the servants clued him in as to what the rejoicing was all about but he could not abide the celebration of his younger brother’s return

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home. Lauding himself as someone who had remained loyal to his father, he accused his younger brother of consorting with prostitutes, an accusation similar to one directed at Jesus (cf. Luke 7:34, 39).

The father acknowledges the elder son’s loyalty, but remains adamant in his desire to celebrate and rejoice for “he [the younger son] was lost and has been found.”

#### *BROKEN FOR US:*

Reflecting the setting of this beautiful story in Luke’s gospel, today’s homily should be devoted to the interplay between human sinfulness and divine mercy. The consequence of the younger brother’s pride and self-sufficiency eventually led him to a dismal situation in which he came to his senses and repented. Hopefully, those who listen to today’s reading of the story will not be reduced to such abysmal circumstances before they come to their senses and repent.

No matter the depths to which a person has fallen, God’s mercy is proactive, every ready to embrace the repentant sinner. The parable’s celebratory banquet illustrates the joy that should accompany the repentant sinner’s return to the family of God. The banquet symbolizes the messianic banquet, a typical eschatological motif.

Lessons can also be learned from the conduct of the older brother. He was quick to characterize his younger sibling as being sexual profligate even though the earlier narrative suggests nothing of the sort. What kinds of sin do we attribute to people whom we look down upon? It is so easy, for example, to characterize those who can’t find a job as lazy, worthless, spongers.

In the oral tradition behind today’s gospel reading, the elder brother is certainly a symbol of righteous Pharisees who could not abide Jesus’ acceptance and fellowship with sinners. Do we, the righteous believing community, accept sinners into our fellowship? Do we look askance—and judgmentally—at some of the people who come forward to receive the eucharist on any given Sunday morning?

### **FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT**

March 17, 2013

#### *LITURGY:*

**Isaiah 43:16-21** with allusions to many of the important themes of Second Isaiah likens Israel’s return from exile to the Exodus.

**Philippians 3:8-14** is a passage in which Paul writes very personally and very enthusiastically about the gift of righteousness that God has given to him.

**John 8:1-11** warrants an extensive footnote in the New American Bible. The footnote begins, “The story . . . is a later insertion here, missing from all Greek manuscripts.” Similarly the recently published *Jewish Annotated New Testament* notes, “This episode is an interpolation and therefore not part of the original Gospel.” For this reason, the passage is placed within brackets in most modern editions of the New Testament, including *The New American Bible*, and is not

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used in the ecumenical *Common Lectionary* which for the most part follows the *Lectionary for Sunday Mass*.

Appearing in some New Testament manuscripts after Luke 21:38 and some patristic witnesses, the story of the woman caught *in flagrante delictu* was probably composed fairly early on within the history of the church (see my *Sexual Ethics and the New Testament: Behavior and Belief* [Companions to the New Testament. New York: Crossroad, 2000], 1-10). In many ways, the illustrative story is a bit artificial. Notably absent from the tale are the woman’s paramour, who also merited death (cf. Lev 20:10; Deut 22:24; Josephus, *Against Apion* 2.201), and the aggrieved husband, who would have been expected to bring charges against the adulterous pair. Hence, I have called it a “case study.”

The story begins with Jesus teaching in the temple precincts (cf. John 7:14). Assuming the posture of a teacher, Jesus sat down and “all the people” (*pas ho laos*) came to listen. The hyperbole draws attention to Jesus’ teaching as does the fact that the scribes and Pharisees addressed Jesus as “Teacher” (*didaskale*), a respectful form of address normally found only on the lips of Jesus’ disciples (see John 1:38; 3:2; 13:13; 20:16). The scribes and Pharisees asked Jesus to comment on Deut 22:24. Their motive, the story-teller observes, was not to hear Jesus’ opinion on a verse whose prescriptions were sometimes eased within Jewish tradition and certainly could not be observed so long as Roman law was the law of the land. Rather the scribes and Pharisees were out to test Jesus (*peirazontes auton*).

Apparently oblivious to what was being said to him, Jesus dawdled on the ground. When the scribes and Pharisees continue to question him, Jesus rose and addressed them with the now famous, “Let the one among you who is without sin be a first to throw a stone at her.” Then Jesus resumed his dawdling. While he dawdled on the ground, the religious authorities began to leave, one by one, the eldest first, until finally Jesus was alone with the woman in the middle of the crowd of people. [“Before him” is the translation of the Greek *en meso* (v. 9), literally, “in the middle.”] There were witnesses to what Jesus said and did.

Again Jesus rose, once again having something to say. He asked the adulteress about her accusers, “Where are they? Isn’t any one around to accuse you?” Her answer was obvious. There was no one left to accuse her. Jesus let her suffer no more. “Neither do I condemn you. Go, “he said,” and from now on sin no more.”

#### ***BROKEN FOR US:***

This beautiful story probably rings a bell for many of us who have seen news reports of adulterous woman receiving stoning as a punishment for their crime under a literal application of the law of sharia in various areas of the Muslim world. As was the case of the woman in the story of today’s gospel, there is generally little of any mention of the man with whom she committed adultery. The sexist discrimination is as unjust today as it was in Jesus’ day.

Lest we become carried away with real or feigned indignation at the injustice, we should remember that the gospel story is a dramatic illustration of Jesus’ forgiveness of sin. No matter the lengths to which society and religious authorities are ready to go to mete punishment on

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those whom they consider to be sinners, they should first look at themselves and consider the sin that is present in their own lives. No matter how serious society and religious authorities are ready to condemn a sinner, Jesus is not ready to condemn. He is ready only to forgive. There is but one condition, that the sinner heed Jesus' word to sin no more. Jesus' willingness to forgive sin constitutes a challenge to the sinner, to change his or her ways, to undergo real conversion.

## **PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORD'S PASSION**

March 24, 2013

### *LITURGY:*

**Isaiah 50:4-7** is taken from the third Servant Song in Second Isaiah.

**Philippians 2:6-11** contains Paul's great christological hymn.

**Luke 22:14-23:56** is Luke's version of the Passion narrative. The narrative has been taken over from Luke's Markan source and edited by the evangelist. The all too brief remarks that follow will draw attention to the particularly Lukan aspects of the narrative.

The narrative begins with Jesus' celebration of a Passover seder with the apostles. Luke accentuates the Passover character of the narrative by mentioning a second cup. According to the Mishnah (*Peshaim* 10:17) four cups were blessed during the meal. Luke downplays the role of Judas. He mentions the presence of the apostles with Jesus, rather than the presence of *The Twelve*. His Jesus speaks of the betrayer in just one verse (v.21).

The idea that the apostles share a single cup, mentioned immediately after Luke had talked about the kingdom of God, suggests that the apostles share in Jesus' kingly authority but this leads to the dispute in vv. 29-30. The ritual of the bread recalls the feeding of the crowd in Luke 9:10-17; the "do this in memory of me," not found in Matthew and Mark (cf. 1 Cor 11:20-26) underscores the etiological nature of the narrative.

Throughout his narrative, Luke portrays Jesus as a teacher by describing him as one who gives after dinner speeches, as teachers in the Hellenistic world were wont to do (see my article, "The Man Who Came to Dinner," in R. Bieringer, G. Van Belle, and J. Verheyden., eds., *Luke and His Readers*. BETL 182 [Leuven: University Press--Peeters, 2004], 151-172). Hence Luke includes a substantial section of table talk by Jesus while he and the apostles were still at the meal (vv. 22-48).

Jesus' speech, ostensibly in response to the argument about authority that had broken out among the apostles, has the character of a farewell discourse. As is frequently the case in farewell discourses, Jesus' words focus on his succession. The apostles are reminded that they are to be servants, as Jesus was, a kind of leadership unlike that of the secular world. A particular role is apportioned to Peter, who is to strengthen his fellow apostles. Despite his bravado, he is weak and will thrice deny Jesus but Jesus prays for him. The final verses of Jesus' speech (vv.35-38) reverse the instruction given to the seventy disciples in Luke 10:4, signaling that a new phrase in the apostles' lives was about to begin

Luke's account of the agony in the garden and the arrest of Jesus (Luke 22:39-53) substantially follows Mark, but Luke has introduced the episode of the comforting angel (vv. 43-

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44, not found in all the ancient manuscripts, but included in the recently released twenty-eighth edition of Nestle-Aland’s *Novum Testamentum Graece*; see the discussion in Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* [2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1994], 151). On the other hand, Luke has condensed the story of the disciples falling asleep as well as the account of Jesus’ trial before the Sanhedrin in the home of the high priest, a story into which the account of Peter’s triple denial has been inserted,

The subsequent narrative, essentially Jesus’ trial before Pilate (Luke 23:1-12), differs from Luke’s Markan source in that Luke has added a brief account of the specific charge of *lèse majesté* (v. 2), a declaration of Pilate’s finding of innocence (v.4; cf. v. 14), and the hearing before Herod (vv. 6-12), an incident found only in Luke among the four canonical gospels.

The account of Jesus being led to Golgotha—a Semitic term for which Luke uses only the Greek equivalent, “the Skull” (v.33—is distinct from other accounts of the “way of the cross” by reason of Luke’s episode of Jesus’ dialogue with a group of women (vv. 37-41). The narrative is motivated by Luke’s concern for women throughout the gospel. Hitherto the lengthy Passion Narrative appears to focus on men: Jesus, his apostles, the officials, the crowds. What about women? one might ask.

The parabolic saying about the dry wood says that things are going to be different from what they have been. Unfortunately the women will continue to be victims in the terrible circumstances about to happen. Even the innocent will suffer in the eschatological destruction, through no fault of their own.

The dialogue is what stands out in Luke’s account of the crucifixion itself. The dialogue with the good thief (vv. 39-43), featuring yet another declaration of Jesus’ innocence, portrays Jesus as Savior and speaks of the “today” of salvation, both important features of Luke’s christology. Omitting Jesus’ poignant plea, “My God, my God,” why have you forsaken me” (Ps 21:1), Luke describes Jesus as expiring but interprets this not as Jesus’ last gasp but as handing over the spirit, his mission completed (v. 46).

After Jesus’ death, the centurion does not say that Jesus was a son of God (cf. Mark 15:39); rather he declares Jesus innocence, an assertion whose Greek words, *dikaios en* (v.47), might better suggest that the centurion contemplates the dead Jesus as being righteous, one who was in a proper relationship with God and his fellow human beings.

#### ***BROKEN FOR US:***

I have always found it difficult to preach on both Palm Sunday and Easter. There is so much to say. By themselves, the narratives speak so eloquently. We ponder the cross and the empty tomb.

Perhaps the best way to preach on Palm Sunday is focus on one of the readings’ short dialogues, perhaps Jesus’ dialogue with Peter during the meal or his dialogue with the good thief as he hung on the cross. Then again the centurion’s double-meaning *dikaios en* might be something for the congregation to think about.

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## **EASTER SUNDAY OF THE RESURRECTION OF THE LORD**

March 31, 2013

### *LITURGY: THE MASS OF EASTER DAY:*

**Acts 10:34a, 37-43** is an excerpt from Peter’s speech to Cornelius in which he proclaims that God raised Jesus on the third day and chose the apostles to give witness to the resurrection.

**Colossians 3:1-4** proclaims that Christ sits at the right hand of God (see Ps 110:1). The alternative reading, **1 Cor 5:6b-8**, describes Christ as the Paschal Lamb (see Exod 12:3-13).

**John 20:1-9** or **Luke 24:1-12** are the two passages from which a choice must be made as a gospel reading for Easter Day. John 20:1-9 is the reading reading for the Mass on Easter day in all three years of the triennial liturgical cycle. [*Emmanuel* 117 (2011) 168-186, 183-185 contains my reflection on the Johannine text.] Luke 24:1-12, the assigned gospel lection for this year’s celebration of the Easter vigil, may be read during the Mass of Easter Day.

The Lukan narrative essentially follows Mark 16:1-8 but its last verse (v. 12) suggests that Luke has at his disposition a source that was also available to the author of the Fourth Gospel (cf. John 20:2-10). Luke had told his readers that he was going to check out all the sources (cf. Luke 1:1-3). In its present form the narrative is clearly a Lukan story, with four scenes.

Scene One (vv. 1-3) describes the finding of the empty tomb by women who had accompanied Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem (cf. Luke 8:13; 23:49, 55). Immediately after Jesus’ death the women had started to prepare the spices and ointments for Jesus’ burial (Luke 23:56), something that Joseph of Arimathea had failed to do or perhaps had not been able to do (Luke 23:53-54). The sabbath intervened. Once the sabbath was over, at the very crack of dawn on the following day, the women went to the tomb to accomplish the task that they had set out for themselves. In comparison with the parallel resurrection accounts in Mark and Matthew, Luke neither identifies the women at this point in the story nor exploit the story of the stone at the entrance to the tomb. In matter of fact fashion, Luke simply says that the stone had been rolled away and that the women did not find the body of Jesus.

Scene Two (vv. 4-8) features the Easter proclamation, “He is not here, but he has been raised (*egerthe*)” (v. 5). The women knew that Jesus was not in the tomb. That he had been raised was news—good news, the essence of the gospel—to them. The message that Jesus was living, that he had been raised from the dead, was conveyed by two men in dazzling array—compare with Mark’s one man and Matthew’s angel of the Lord. Using a number of literary traits, Luke describes the women’s experience as truly awesome. The good news announced to them is presented as the fulfillment of what Jesus had said to them in Galilee (Luke 9:22; cf. 9:44; 18:33). The women remembered what Jesus had told them. This implicit confirmation that the women were indeed among the disciples instructed by Jesus retain Mark 16:7’s mention of Galilee but in Luke the disciples are not told to go to Galilee; rather Galilee is the place where Jesus had spoken about his resurrection.



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In Scene Three (vv. 9-11) the women leave the tomb, their intended task no longer necessary. They told (*apengeilan*) all that had happened (*panta*) to the Eleven and all (*pasin*) the others. The double “all” emphasizes the widespread impact of the good news. That there were eleven principal recipients of the message takes into account the defection of Judas and prepares for the choice of Matthias in Acts 1:15-26.

Deft story-teller that he was, Luke now tells his readers the names of the women who participated in the drama. They were important characters in Luke’s *dramatis personae* but until now, Luke had not informed the readers who they were. Now Luke names Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and the mother of James. Luke omits the name of Salome (cf. Mark 16:1) from the group of women who had gone to the tomb—a larger group than Mark’s group of three; but he mentions Joanna, the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza (cf. Luke 8:3), perhaps intentionally complimenting his own story of the hearing before Herod (Luke 23:6-12). The group of women told the apostles (*apostoloi*) about their experience but the men discounted the tale as so much nonsense (*leros*). In this way, Luke introduces the motif of the disciples’ incredulity found in the other gospel stories, including the addendum to Mark (see Matt 28:16; John 20:24-29; Mark 16:13-14; Luke 24:38).

In Scene Four (v. 12) a curious Peter runs to the tomb. He sees the now useless burial shroud and goes home amazed (*thaumazon*). It would take an appearance of the Lord to convince him that Jesus was alive, raised from among the dead (cf. Luke 24:24, 34)

#### *BROKEN FOR US:*

The two men’s Easter proclamation, the subject of the women’s report to the apostles, should be the focus of today’s homily. The message is hard to believe. The apostles didn’t believe; Peter wasn’t convinced even after he had seen the empty tomb and the burial clothes, a token that Jesus had conquered death. Despite the difficulty of accepting the message, the Easter proclamation has a wide-spread import. It is meant for the leaders of the Christian community and “all the others” (v. 9). Jesus is victor over death and that is indeed good news.

## **SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER**

April 7, 2013

#### *LITURGY:*

**Acts 5:12-16** speaks of marvelous deeds accomplished by the apostles and the growth of the community of believers in Jerusalem.

**Revelation 1:9-11a, 12-13, 17-19**--and let the reader beware that the title of the book is “Revelation, in the singular, not “Revelations” in the plural!—is the beginning of what has sometimes been called the most enigmatic book in the Bible. It is the first of six selections from Revelation that contribute to an abbreviated semi-continuous reading of this book in Cycle C.

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**John 20:19-31**, the original conclusion to the Fourth Gospel, that is, before John 21 was added as an epilogue, is a constant in the triennial cycle of Johannine readings in the Easter season.

The first section of the gospel lection (vv. 19-25), whose first verses may be used as the gospel lection for the Feast of Pentecost (John 20:19-23), describes Jesus’ appearance to his disciples on the first day of the week. The author’s mention of the first day of the week in verse 19 and, implicitly, in verse 26 suggests the early Christian practice of Jesus’ disciples gathering together on the first day of the week.

Jesus appeared to his “disciples.” The author of the Fourth Gospel does not once mention “the apostles.” The disciples would include some of those known as apostles in the Synoptic Gospels but would include others as well. The disciples had gathered in a locale where locked doors served as their protection against “the Jews.” “The Jews” is Johannine code for those leaders of the Jewish nation who were opposed to Jesus and were instrumental in bringing about his death. The homilist must be careful when he or she preaches on this passage lest his or her manner of speaking about the Jews leads to or reinforces anti-Semitic sentiments in the congregation.

This first section of the gospel reading is the Fourth Gospel’s account of Pentecost, the gift of the Spirit to the disciples. In this Johannine account, the link between Jesus and the gift of the Spirit is clearer than it is in the well-known account of Pentecost in Acts 2. Jesus’ breathing on the disciples is a reminder that the Greek *pneuma* and the Hebrew *ruah* can be translated “breath” or “spirit.” Jesus links the gift of the Spirit with the forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness comes with the sacrament of baptism. Much later in its history the church used this text as a proof text for the institution of the sacrament of penance by Jesus. At best, this later usage is an accommodation of the text.

The final verses of the first unit introduce the figure of Thomas. He is presented as someone who initially doubts the core Christian belief that Jesus had been raised from the dead. It is noteworthy that only one other person in the Fourth Gospel is identified as “one of the Twelve.” That other person is Judas who betrayed Jesus (John 6:71). Presented as “doubting Thomas,” Thomas serves as a scapegoat for the doubt of the disciples (see Matt 28:17; Mark 16:11, 13, 14; Luke 24:11). This is in keeping with the evangelist’s way of creating a dramatic account. Just as he uses Mary Magdalene as a representative of the Galilean women to whom the risen Jesus appeared (John 20:11-18), so he uses Thomas to represent the doubt of a larger group of Jesus’ disciples. The evangelist presents a graphic description of Thomas’ doubt. Not only does he want to put his finger into the nail holes of the crucifixion, he also wants to put his hand into the hole in Jesus’ side. The Fourth Gospel is alone in mentioning the hole in the side created by the soldier’s lance (see John 19:34).

The second section of today’s gospel narrative (vv. 26-29) replicates the scenario of the first unit, except that this time the group to whom Jesus appears includes Thomas. The repeated greeting, “peace to you” (vv. 19, 26), is the traditional *shalom* but since the Johannine narrative functions on two levels, that of the story and that of symbolism and theology, the reader should

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realize that the greeting speaks of peace as a gift of the risen Jesus to his disciples. Jesus recalls Thomas’ strong language (v. 25) and challenges his disciple to do as he had boasted.

Thomas does not do so. Instead he confesses Jesus as “my Lord and my God,” the strongest christological confession in the Fourth Gospel. The Roman Emperor Domitian, whose reign, 81-96 C.E., ended just before the Fourth Gospel was written demanded that he be called “our lord and god” (See Suetonius, *Domitian*, 13). It is therefore not unlikely that there was some anti-imperial polemic in the confession of Jesus that the evangelist placed on the lips of Thomas.

The focus of verses 26-29 is the dialogue between Thomas and Jesus. Thomas makes a confession of faith in the risen Jesus. Jesus pronounced a blessing on those who have faith in him without the benefit of a “physical” appearance. Jesus’ question to Thomas (v. 21) serves to emphasize the beatitude. Blessed are those who have not “seen” but nevertheless believe in the risen Jesus. The beatitude is remarkable. Not only does it speak of the faith of believers for generations to come but it also appears at the end of the gospel and is the only true beatitude in the Fourth Gospel (cf. John 13:17). The final words of Jesus in the first draft of the Johannine gospel—that is, excluding the epilogue in chapter 21—are those of this beatitude, “Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed” (See my “Blessed Are Those Who Have Not Seen’: John 20:29,” in Rekha M. Chennattu and Mary L. Coloe, *Transcending Boundaries: Contemporary Readings of the New Testament* [Biblioteca di Scienze Religiose 187; Rome: LAS, 2005] 173-190).

The third section of today’s reading (John 20:30-31) was the original ending of the gospel narrative. In a final editorial comment, the evangelist tells his readers why the gospel was written. His story about Jesus was written so that the believer might believe that Jesus was Messiah and Son of God. “Messiah” (=“Christ,” see John 1:41) is one of the oldest Christian confessional titles for Jesus. “Son of God” is a particularly Johannine title.

The consequence of belief in Jesus is that those who believe in him have eternal life because of him. That Jesus came to give life, eternal life, is a major theme in the Fourth Gospel. Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, for example, “the water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (John 4:14; cf. John 10:10).

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*BROKEN FOR US:*

Today’s gospel reading is very rich. It offers any number of themes for a homilist to develop. Among the many themes that can be developed are Jesus’ gift of the Spirit and his gift of peace, baptism as a sacrament of the forgiveness of sins, faith in Jesus as both confessional and life giving, and Jesus’ blessing of those who believe without having been the recipient of a vision of the risen Lord.

### **THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER**

April 14, 2013

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* by Raymond F. Collins.

*LITURGY:*

**Acts 5:27-32, 40b-41** describes a judicial hearing of the disciples before the Sanhedrin. The reason? They had born witness (cf. Acts 1:8) to Jesus having been put to death as an accused criminal by the authorities and God’s trumping of that action by exalting Jesus as leader and savior.

**Revelation 5:11-14** highlights a doxology addressed to God and his Lamb by every creature in heaven and on earth.

**John 21:1-19** represents the only use of the Epilogue to the Fourth Gospel (John 21) in the triennial cycle of Sunday readings. After the scene is set in vv. 1-3, the reading consists of three literary scenes. In setting the scene, the author of the epilogue announces that he is going to continue with the Fourth Gospel’s “revelation” of Jesus (cf. 1:31; 2:11; 3:21; 7:4; 9:3; 17:6). A full complement of disciples, seven in all, is present. The group includes Peter and Thomas, principals in John 20, Nathanael, now identified as a man from Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, mentioned for the first time in the Fourth Gospel, and two nameless disciples, one of whom must have been the Beloved Disciple (cf. v. 7). Peter decides to go fishing; the other six decide to go with him. The narrative, which mentions Peter as a fisherman for the first and only time in the Fourth Gospel, appears to be derived from a source used by Luke in Luke 5:1-11. A night on the sea ends with no catch to show for it.

The first scene (vv. 4-8) is the core of a miracle story. Once there had been no fish but when Jesus’ authority comes into play, there is an abundance of fish. Jesus’ authority extends to the detail of casting the net from the right side of the boat. Familiar motifs enter into the story. The disciples do not recognize the risen one (cf. John 20:15; Luke 24:12-35, 36-38). The Johannine motif of a kind of competition between the Beloved Disciple and Simon Peter enters in. As in John 20:8, the Beloved Disciple is the believer. He recognizes Jesus and points him out to Peter, The ever impetuous Peter—the trait is often underscored in the Synoptics—throws some clothes on and plunges into the sea, the more quickly to reach Jesus.

The second scene (vv. 9-14) tells about an early morning meal on the shore. At some point in the early tradition of the pericope, the idea of a meal probably indicated that Jesus was truly risen (cf. Luke 24:41-43; Mark 5:43 and parallels; John 12:2) but John emphasizes other elements. The charcoal fire recalls another charcoal fire (John 18:18, 25), beside which Peter denied Jesus and thus anticipates Peter’s rehabilitation in John 21:15-19). The food recalls the bread and fish of the story of Jesus’ feeding the five thousand (John 6:1-15), with its eucharistic overtones (cf. Luke 24:35). The number of fish, 153, is undoubtedly symbolic; but symbol of what?

The third scene (vv. 10-19), the Fourth Gospel’s version of the primacy of Peter, represents Peter’s rehabilitation after his triple denial of Jesus (John 18:15-18, 25-27). Peter confesses his love for Jesus three times, each time adding that the risen Lord surely knows Peter’s love for him. Though a fisherman, Peter is charged with a pastoral responsibility that recalls Jesus’ role as the Good Shepherd (John 10:11, 14-16). Peter is to succeed Jesus in taking care of the flock, a traditional symbol of God’s people.

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* by Raymond F. Collins.

Jesus’ double “Amen” (v. 18) introduces Jesus harsh reminder to Peter. In times past—when he was young—Peter did what he wanted to do. Now--when he is old--things are different. Peter is no longer master of his own destiny. Others will control his fate. By the time the epilogue was written, Peter had already been put to death for his role in the fledgling community of Jesus’ disciples. There remained only more thing for Jesus to say. That was to remind Peter that he was to be a loyal disciple for the rest of his days.

*BROKEN FOR US:*

Today’s homily might appropriately focus on leadership in the church, beginning with the highest levels of leadership. Leadership requires conversion, as is indicated by Peter’s triple denial, followed by his triple confession of faith—the kind of conversion about which the late Cardinal Carlo Martini spoke about in an interview just before his death. Leadership requires a love of Jesus and a confidence in one’s faith. Leadership involves a pastoral role, a kind of leadership different from that of secular leaders, the kings and legislators of this world. Leadership involves suffering and even death for the sake of love of Jesus. And leadership requires that one be a disciple, one of the company of the loyal disciples of Jesus.

**FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER**

April 21, 2013

*LITURGY:*

**Acts 13:14, 43-52** describes the reaction to Paul’s proclamation of the gospel (cf. Acts 13: 15-41, the intervenient and omitted passage of today’s lection) in the synagogue of Antioch in Pisidia, an ancient city in the Turkish Lakes Region.

**Revelation 7:9, 14b-17** imaginatively speaks about the universality of salvation.

**John 10:27-30** continues the reading on John 10, which began on the Fourth Sunday of Easter in Year A and continued on the same Sunday in Year B. Jesus’ words were addressed to Jewish leaders who had confronted him about his messiahship (John 10:24) on the Feast of the Dedication of the Temple. At the time festival was a relatively new feast that had been inaugurated within Judaism to commemorate the rededication of the Temple under Judas Maccabeus (cf. 1 Macc 4:52-59; 2 Macc 10:5-8). The festival continues today in the Jewish celebration of Hanukkah.

The reading supposes that Jesus is the Good Shepherd (John 10:11). Its confrontational character owes to the fact that in the Johannine narrative Jesus has just told the Jewish leaders, the Johannine “Jews,” that they do not belong to his flock (John 10:26). These “Jews” celebrate the temple festivals but there is another way of belonging to God. That is to belong to Jesus’ flock, as today’s gospel lection makes clear.

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* by Raymond F. Collins.

Jesus speaks of his sheep as those who listen to his voice. Members of his flock hear and understand. These are the people whom Jesus knows, who share in his experience. They are the disciples who follow him.

They have been gifted by Jesus with a gift that he alone can give, the gift of eternal life (*zoe aionios*), a major Johannine theme (John 3:15, 16, 36; 5:24, 39; 6:27, 40, 47, 54, 68). That gift is the purpose of his mission, says the Johannine Jesus: “I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). The gift is associated with belief in Jesus (John 3:15; 5:24; etc.). In today’s gospel lection Jesus draws out an implication of the gift. Those who receive it shall never perish; no one can separate his disciples from Jesus. Implicit in the assertion is the idea that those who do not believe in Jesus will not receive the gift and will perish. In context, these are the unbelieving and argumentative Jewish leaders.

Jesus moves the discussion to another level when he speaks of the Father, the one God of Israel in honor of whom the temple had been rededicated, that pagan altars erected on the site torn down. There is no doubt that the one and only God of Israel is more powerful than other deities. No one can take anyone out of the Father’s hand because Jesus and the Father are one. Whoever is in Jesus’ hand is in the Father’s hand.

#### *BROKEN FOR US:*

In preaching today’s gospel, the homilist should avoid eisegesis, specifically reading Trinitarian theology into Jesus’ powerful saying, “I and the Father are one” (v. 30). At most, there is a hint “of the metaphysical depths contained in the relationship between Jesus and the Father” in the logion (see Rudolph Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John*, 2, [New York: Seabury, 1980]. 308).

What should be emphasized is the importance of faith in the life of the believer, particularly that aspect of faith which consists of listening to Jesus’ voice, of heeding his words. For a person with such a faith, God’s providential care is expressed in the gift of eternal life mediated by Jesus, God’s Son, agent, and sacrament.

### **FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER**

April 28, 2013

#### *LITURGY:*

**Acts 14:21-27** tells about the conclusion of Paul’s first missionary voyage and the report that Paul gave to the church at Antioch which had commissioned him and Barnabas for this mission (Acts 13:1-3).

**Revelation 21:1-51** uses many different images to describe the “new Jerusalem.”

**John 13:31-33a, 34-35** tells about what happened after Judas abruptly left the meal that he was sharing with Jesus and the other disciples. His departure marked the beginning, the “now” (*nyn*), of Jesus’ hour.

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* by Raymond F. Collins.

The Jesus of the Fourth Gospel typically uses the Son of Man epithet to speak of his crucifixion (John 1:51; 3:14; 6:27, 53; 8:28 12:23). Now that the time of the crucifixion is at hand, Jesus interprets the reality of what is to happen for the disciples. They are to know that the raising up of Jesus on the cross, Jesus’ exaltation, is his glorification. It is also the glorification of God. Through the crucifixion, God is to be glorified. By means of Jesus’ crucifixion, God is to be revealed, as he had been in the past, particularly at Sinai. That the evangelist wants his readers to understand that the crucifixion is the means of God’s revelation by his five-fold use of the word glorify (*doxazo*). In the Fourth Gospel, “glory” (*doxa*) is a term that refers to revelation (see John 1:14; 2:11; 5:44; 7:18; 11:4, 40; 12:41, 43). The evangelist uses this language to indicate that what the crucifixion really means. According to the author of the Fourth Gospel, the crucifixion is not so much a terrible event as it is the means by which the Son and his Father are revealed to the world.

This is to happen momentarily. Jesus speaks of it as happening “at once,” (*euthus*, “immediately”). In the pathos of the moment, Jesus addresses his disciples as his “little children” (*teknia*), thus indicating his undying affection for them. He continues to love them until the end (cf. John 13:1, an idea echoed in the Fourth Eucharistic Prayer). Having thus affirmed his love for them, Jesus tells them that the time is short. He is about to leave them.

As he is about to leave, Jesus gives his disciples a departing gift, the new commandment: “As I have loved you, so you should also love one another” (see my “A New Commandment I Give to You, That You Love One Another . . . ‘ (John 13:34),” in *These Things Have Been Written: Studies on the Fourth Gospel* [Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs 2. Louvain: Peeters—Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990], 217-256).

Jesus “as I have loved you,” is particularly important. It immediately suggests that the disciples love for one another should emulate Jesus’ love for them. Jesus’ love for the disciples was expressed in the humble gesture of washing their feet, a service to them that Jesus performed in order to set an example for them (John 13:15). The love of Jesus for them was a love until the end (John 13:1, 33). He would go so far as to lay down his life for them (John 10:15, 17; 15:13, a verse that comments specifically on the love command of John 15:12).

“As I have loved you,” implies more than mere imitation of Jesus’ love for the disciples. The Father’s love for Jesus is the source of Jesus’ love for the disciples (15:9). Jesus abides in the Father’s love. If the disciples love one another as Jesus loved them, they will abide in the Father’s love just as Jesus abided in the Father’s love. There is chain between the Father’s love for Jesus, Jesus’ love for the disciples, and the disciples’ love for one another.

Because their love for one another is the means of their abiding in the Father’s love, Jesus command that they love one another is truly a gift (*didomi*, “I give,” v. 34), Jesus’ farewell gift to his disciples. It is a memento of what Jesus did for them; it is a means by which Jesus and the Father remain present to them.

To underscore the importance of the commandment, Jesus says that the fulfillment of the commandment is the distinguishing mark of his disciples. It should be the reality that

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characterizes their existence as disciples of Jesus, for "This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

*BROKEN FOR US:*

Although today's gospel reading is relatively short, it calls for two homilies. The first should be devoted to the meaning of Jesus' crucifixion. That homily may well be necessary for a congregation that appreciates only the pathos of crucifixion, one that looks upon the crown of thorns as an instrument of torture rather than as an ironic symbol of the kingship of Jesus.

For most congregations, the second homily might be more appropriate. The homily should, however, be consistent with the Johannine tradition. The homily should focus on the meaning of our love for one another. Expressed in simple gestures of support and service though occasionally requiring expressions of greater magnitude, it should be a love that in self-conscious fashion imitates Jesus' love. Our love for one another is the way that Jesus loves the other. We are the instruments of Jesus' love for others. If we faithfully receive and heed his parting gift, we can be sure that we abide in the Father's love, just as Jesus did.