An excerpt from "Breaking the Word: Homiletics," by Raymond F. Collins, published in *Emmanuel* 117 (2011) 261-281.

June 5, the Seventh Sunday of Easter, marks the forty-fifth anniversary of the church's World Communications Day. A few months ago Pope Benedict XVI announced that the theme of this year's World Communications Day will be "truth, proclamation, and authenticity of life in the digital age."

The theme underscores the importance of the authenticity of life in one who proclaims the truth. Those entrusted with preaching the Word of God have a ministry of proclaiming The Truth, writ large. The preacher's life confirms or weakens the message that he or she preaches. What a challenge to each of us who have taken on the sharing of God's Word with the people.

The challenge is all the more daunting in that not only do we have to contend with our personal failures and our moral weakness but we must also remember the competition, the manifold means of communication in the digital age, from TV to U-Tube, from Facebook to the I-phone, and the list goes on.

**SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER**
**DIVINE MERCY SUNDAY**
May 1, 2011

LITURGY
**Acts 2:42-47** is one of Luke's summary descriptions of the early church in Jerusalem.
**1 Pet 1:3-9**, taken from a baptismal homily, speaks of the inheritance in heaven that comes to those who have been baptized.
**John 20:19-31** is an early conclusion to the Fourth Gospel. John 21 is an epilogue to the Johannine narrative, added after the composition of the gospel had been substantially concluded.

The first unit (John 20:19-25), to be proclaimed again on June 12, the Feast of Pentecost, 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 the disciples of Jesus 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.

The first unit is the Johannine account of Pentecost, the gift of the Spirit to the disciples. In this 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 to 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 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 unit in today’s gospel narrative (John 20:26-29) replicates the scenario of the first unit, except that this time the group 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 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 him to realize his boast.

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 CE, 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 placed on the lips of Thomas.

The focus of the second unity’s narrative is the dialogue between Thomas and Jesus. Thomas makes a confession of faith in the risen Jesus. Jesus pronounced a blessing on those who, without the benefit of a “physical” appearance, have faith in him. 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. The final words of Jesus in the first draft of the Johannine gospel are those of this beatitude, “Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed.”

The third unit in today’s reading (John 20:30-31) was the original ending of the gospel narrative. It tells us why the gospel was written. The evangelist’s 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, in the reading for the Fourth Sunday after Easter).

BROKEN FOR US

Today's gospel reading is very rich. It offers any number of themes for a homilist to develop. Since texts taken from the Fourth Gospel are featured in the Sundays after Easter and will also be used on Trinity Sunday and the Feast of Corpus Christi, it would be helpful to the congregation were the homilist to say something about the unique narrative that is the Fourth Gospel.

Among the many themes that can be developed are Jesus' gifts of the Spirit and 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**
May 8, 2011

LITURGY

**Acts 2:14, 22-33**, part of Peter's Pentecost speech, has motifs that recur in today's gospel reading.

**1 Pet 1:17-21** speaks of the redemption of God's people through the death of Jesus.

**Luke 24:13-35** contains the prototypical story of disciples recognizing Jesus in the breaking of the bread. The temporal setting of the story is "that very day, the first day of the week," namely, the day of the discovery of the empty tomb (Luke 24:1-13). The geographical setting of the story is the road to Emmaus, a relatively short distance from Jerusalem, Emmaus, and Jerusalem.

The first scene (Luke 24:13-27) opens with two of Jesus' disciples on the road to Emmaus. Artists generally portray the pair as two male disciples but it is possible, and perhaps likely, that Luke had a married couple in mind. The two disciples were sad, broken-hearted because of what had recently happened in Jerusalem. An unknown stranger approached them, asking to join in the conversation. Once part of the discussion, the unknown interlocutor asked about what happened in Jerusalem. The disciples describe the death of Jesus at the hands of the chief priests and rulers. Jesus is described in familiar Lukan terms as a prophet known for his mighty works (see Luke 4:24; 13:33; Acts 2:22; 3:22; 7:37) and one whom they had hoped would bring about the redemption of Israel (Luke 1:68; 2:38; Acts 2:30-36, today's first reading; 13:32-34). Then they shared an astounding story with the stranger. They told him that some of the women in their company had discovered an empty tomb early that morning. At the empty tomb they experienced a vision of angels who told them that the dead Jesus was alive.

Pursuing the conversation, the still unrecognized interlocutor tells the two disciples that the scriptures say that the Messiah was to suffer "these things." The Messiah's suffering was of

divine necessity (see Luke 24:44-45; Acts 2:23). Luke does not mention any specific scriptural texts but his long beatitude (Luke 6:22-23; cf. 6:26a; see also Acts 7:51-52) describes the bad things that have happened to prophets in the past. A prophet proclaims God's word and is rejected, and sometimes killed. This is a familiar biblical pattern, one especially used by the Deuteronomist. Luke casts Jesus in the role of a prophet (Luke 4:16-27) and portrays what happened to him because of his fulfilling is Spirit-inspired mission (Luke 4:29).

The second scene (Luke 24:28-32) takes place in Emmaus, presumably the home of the two disciples. The disciples importune the stranger to stay at their house overnight. He accepts their hospitality and sits down for a meal with them. The stranger takes the bread, says the blessing, breaks the bread, and gives it to them. This is the familiar eucharistic ritual, the breaking of the bread (Acts 2:42, 47; 20:7, 11). The stranger's words recall Jesus' words at the feeding of the crowds (Luke 9:16) and at the Last Supper (Luke 22:9). The pair of disciples recognize Jesus in this eucharist (see v. 35) but they no longer have his physical presence. He disappears. And now they understand the Scriptures because they have recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread.

The third scene (Luke 24:33-35) is set in Jerusalem, to which the two disciples returned that very evening. They meet with the Eleven and those who were with them. A sharing of experiences occurs. Those who had stayed in Jerusalem proclaimed that the Lord had been raised and that he had appeared to Simon.

Simon Peter is an important figure in Luke's narrative. See especially Luke 5:10, where the words about catching people are addressed only to Simon, and Luke 22:31-32, where Jesus promises that Simon will strengthen his brothers and sisters. The only narrative account of Jesus' appearance to Peter in the New Testament found in John 21, the epilogue to the Fourth Gospel (cf. 1 Cor 15:4). In turn, the pair of disciples share the story of their recognizing Jesus in the breaking of the bread.

BROKEN FOR US

The climax of Luke's narrative is the recognition of Jesus in the eucharist. Today we too have an experience of the risen Jesus in the celebration of the Eucharist. The resurrection of Jesus becomes real for us, not so much because the Resurrection occurred millennia ago but because we experience the risen Jesus in the eucharist that we celebrate. The experience of the risen Jesus in the celebration of the eucharist is what enables us to truly understand the Scriptures. The eucharistic presence of Jesus and the understand of Scripture go together.

**FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER**
May 15, 2011

LITURGY
**Acts 2:14a, 36-41** is an excerpt from Peter's speech on the first Christian Pentecost.

An excerpt from "Breaking the Word: Homiletics," by Raymond F. Collins, published in *Emmanuel* 117 (2011) 261-281.

**1 Pet 2:20b-25** encourages the baptized to imitate Jesus and live a righteous life.
**John 10:1-10** uses the image of the sheepfold, a pen in which sheep were kept, to speak of Jesus as the one through whom we have access to life. Interpreters of the Fourth Gospel sometime speak of this narrative as one of the two "parables" in the Fourth Gospel, the other being the account of the vine and the branches (John 15:1-11).

Years ago, the former archbishop of Utrecht, the Netherlands, Cardinal Simonis, wrote a doctoral thesis on this passage in the Fourth Gospel. He suggested that the image of the sheepfold was one that evoked the temple in Jerusalem. Thus the idea of entrance in the parable points to entrance into the presence of God.

Both parts of today's narrative begin with a solemn introductory formula, "Amen, amen, I say to you" (vv. 1, 7). The formula, found in only in the Fourth Gospel in ancient Christian and Jewish literature, adds solemnity to the discourse and confirms the weight of what is to be said. The words, "I say to you," point to Jesus as the revealer.

The first part of the discourse (John 10:1-6) is apparently addressed to the Pharisees who do not understand what Jesus has said. For them his words are a puzzling figure of speech (*paroimia*, v. 6). Jesus' first words distinguish the shepherd from the robber. The shepherd knows the sheep. He knows them so well that each one has a name by which the shepherd is able to call to them. Should a robber breach the walls of the pen and enter the sheepfold, the sheep will run away from him. In contrast, the sheep whom the shepherd knows so well will obey his command to leave the pen. They will follow him out of the pen and then he will lead them, presumably to a place where they will be able to graze (see v. 9). This first part of Jesus' discourse highlights the intimacy that exists between the shepherd and his sheep.

The second part of the discourse (John 10:7-10) uses a related image to speak about Jesus. Whereas he had been portrayed as the shepherd in verses 1-7, now he is pictured as the gate of the pen. Slippage in imagery occasionally occurs in the Fourth Gospel, as it does here. This second part of the discourse speaks about thieves and robbers who have evil intentions with regard to the sheep. Jesus identifies these thieves and robbers with those who came before him. Those who came before him were not the traditional prophets of Israel, but recent generations of Pharisees who took issue with Jesus' teaching and those Pharisees who were opposed to the Johannine community of believers (cf. John 9:22). Over and against them stands Jesus who represents access to the presence of God.

Believers who embrace Jesus in their relationship with God enjoy the life that Jesus came to give. Jesus' words, "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly," are among the most important mission statements in the Fourth Gospel. Homilists and catechists often say that Jesus came to save us from our sins. The Fourth evangelist speaks more positively. He says that Jesus came so that we may have life in abundance.

BROKEN FOR US

Because the great King David had been a shepherd, shepherd imagery was often used in the Bible in reference to the leadership of God's people.

An excerpt from "Breaking the Word: Homiletics," by Raymond F. Collins, published in *Emmanuel* 117 (2011) 261-281.

The image of Jesus, the good shepherd, is evoked by several passages in the Synoptic gospels, among them, Matt 9:36, Mark 6:34, and the parable of the lost sheep in Matt 18:12-14 and Luke 15:3. Among the evangelists, it is the author of the Fourth Gospel who especially develops the motif. He does so in John 10:1-18, the first unit of which serves as today's gospel lection. The second part begins with an important "I am" saying, in which Jesus designates himself as the "good shepherd" (John 10:11). The image has long been celebrated in Christian art.

Two motifs dominate the Fourth evangelist's use of the shepherd imagery. The first is the intimacy that exists between the shepherd and his sheep (cf. John 10: 14). The shepherd takes care of the sheep. The shepherd knows each sheep by name. The sheep follow the shepherd because they know and recognize his voice. The second is that the shepherd is the source of life for his sheep. Verses 10:11-18 develop the thought that the sheep have life because the shepherd lays down his life for them.

**FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER**
May 22, 2011

LITURGY
**Acts 6:1-7** describes the division of labor among the leaders of the Jerusalem community.
**1 Pet 2:4-9** uses the image of stones to speak of believers as stones which serve as building blocks for the house which is the church and to speak of Christ as a stumbling block that has been rejected.
**John 14:1-12** speaks of Jesus' departure to the Father. It is an appropriate reading as we look forward to the celebration of the Feast of the Ascension. The reading can easily be divided into two smaller units in which Thomas and Philip make interventions that allow for Jesus' self-revelation.

The first unit (John 14:1-7) begins with Jesus trying to reassure his disciples as his departure becomes imminent. The reassurance takes the form of Jesus explaining to his disciples the reason for his departure. He is going to his Father's house where there are many dwelling places. The Greek word for "dwelling places," *monai*, is related to the Greek word "abide" or "remain," *menein*, which is often used in the Fourth Gospel with a nuance of permanency. Jesus abides with the Father (John 1:27). Those who eat Jesus' flesh and blood abide in him and he in them (John 6:56; cf. 15:4). The disciples abide in Jesus' words (John 8:31; cf. 15:7). The disciples are to abide in Jesus' love as Jesus abides in the Father's love (John 15:10). Thus, "dwelling places" also evokes the idea of reciprocity with Jesus and with the Father. After the dwelling places have been prepared, Jesus will come to take believers to the Father's house where they will be able to abide with the Father, just as Jesus abides permanently with him.

Jesus tells his disciples that they already know about his departure. They should know that he is returning to the Father (see John 10:17-18; 12:27-28). "Doubting" Thomas intervenes to say that the disciples do not know where Jesus is going. Jesus responds with one of the Fourth

Gospel's great "I am" (*ego eimi*) sayings, "I am the way and the truth and the life." Jesus is the way to the Father, the only way, because he is the unique revelation of the Father (see John 1:18). He is the only one who provides access to the Father, whom he has made known (John 14:6). Those who accept Jesus' revelation of the Father accept the truth (see John 1:14-17) and have eternal life in him (see John 3:15-16). Moreover, because of the mutuality of Jesus and the Father (John 10:30, 38; 14:8, 10-11), the one who knows Jesus knows the Father. The knowledge of which Jesus speaks is not intellectual knowledge. It is the accepting experience of Jesus. Jesus is speaking about the one who really knows him, who has a personal relationship with him.

The second unit (John 14:8-12) begins with an intervention by Philip who asks to see the Father. Apparently he has not understood the relationship between Jesus and the Father. A seemingly exasperated Jesus asks him, "Don't you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?" After all this time, don't you get it? To confirm the relationship that he has with the Father Jesus reiterates ideas that he has previously taught, namely, that the words that he speaks are the Fathers' words (John 3:3-4; 5:23-24; 8:18, 28, 38, 47; 12:49; 14:24) and the works that he does are the works of the Father (John 5:20, 36; 9:3-4; 10:25, 32, 37-38). He adds, if you don't believe what I say, believe what I do. Believe because of the works.

Mention of the Father's works leads Jesus to add that those who believe in him will do even greater works than the works that the disciples have witnessed. The ability to do this is predicated on their belief and the departure of Jesus. They will do the works of the Father only after Jesus' departure. To underscore the importance of this teaching, Jesus introduces what he says with the "Amen, Amen, I say to you" formula (see John 10:1, 7, in last week's gospel reading).

BROKEN FOR US

Today's reading is often chosen as the gospel lection for a funeral Mass. The choice is quite appropriate insofar as the text speaks of the purpose of Jesus' departure. He is going to the Father in order to prepare a permanent abode for those who believe in him. Because Jesus has prepared enough dwelling places, they will be able to abide in the Father's house. They will be able to abide in the Father's house, because he has departed to the Father, because his revelatory and salvific mission has been completed with his return to the Father.

The second unit of the reading provides material for another kind of homiletic exposition. The homilist can focus on the words of Jesus as revealing the Father, on Jesus' works as the works of the Father who works through Jesus. The final verse of the reading is a reminder that the Father continues to work through the believing members of the church.

**SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER**
May 29, 2011

LITURGY

An excerpt from "Breaking the Word: Homiletics," by Raymond F. Collins, published in *Emmanuel* 117 (2011) 261-281.

**Acts 8:5-8**, after describing Philip's apostolic ministry, gives an account of its ratification by Peter and John.
**1 Pet 3:15-18** is a reminder that the baptized must continue to hope even though they may suffer because of their allegiance to Christ.
**John 14:15-21** continues last week's gospel reading. Two verses in the gospel narrative, John 14:13-14, have, however, been omitted by the compilers of the lectionary.

The disciples' love for Jesus (see verses 15, 21; cf. vv. 23, 24) is the leitmotif that links together the two units that comprise the gospel lection. The first unit (John 14:15-17) begins with the observation that keeping Jesus' commandments is proof of one's love for him. In fact, there is but one commandment that Jesus gives, namely, that the disciples love one another as Jesus has loved them (John 13:34; 15:12).

The focus of the unit is, however, on the gift of "the Advocate." Since the Greek word *parakletos* has a broad range of connotations, all bearing on the idea that someone has been called to another's side in order to be helpful, some translations opt to transliterate the term by means of the word "Paraclete." "Advocate" suggests that the disciples will be helped when they are on trial, but the Spirit functions in more ways than that in the disciples' lives. Jesus identification of the Advocate as the Spirit of Truth speaks of the Spirit as the one who communicates truth to the disciples. The Advocate is another advocate because Jesus had communicated truth to his disciples. He is, as he said to Thomas (John 14:6), the truth.

When the Spirit comes, in response to Jesus' petition to the Father, the Spirit will prove to be the great discriminator. The "world," Johannine code for those who do not accept Jesus (see John 1:10), will not see, know, or accept the Spirit. On the other hand, those who do accept Jesus and believe in him will receive the gift of the Spirit. The Spirit will remain (*menei*) with them. See the commentary on last week's reading for some of the implications of the Spirit "abiding" with the disciples.

The second unit (John 14:18-21) continues the commentary on Jesus' departure that begin in last week's gospel lection. His departure, Jesus says, does not mean that the disciples will be abandoned. They will not be like orphans, bereft of loving parents. No, the departed Jesus will be with them in another way. The world will no longer have to deal with Jesus' physical presence but, through the gift of the Spirit-Advocate, the disciples will continue to have an experience of the departed Jesus. They will "see" him because he lives. Indeed, they will live because the departed Jesus lives. Moreover, they will come to know—Philip had expressed some hesitancy in this regard—that Jesus is in the Father and that there will be a mutual indwelling between Jesus and his disciples. In addition, because the disciples manifest their love for Jesus through their obedience to the commandment that Jesus has given, they will be loved by the Father and loved by Jesus. They will be graced with the revelation of Jesus himself. In sum, the departure of Jesus will result in a plethora of gifts for the disciples.

BROKEN FOR US

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” by Raymond F. Collins, published in *Emmanuel* 117 (2011) 261-281.

Today’s homily should focus on what has happened because of Jesus’ departure. Because Jesus has asked the Father, the Father will send another Spirit-Advocate who will enable Jesus’ presence with the disciples. As a result, the disciples will be alive with the life of Jesus. There will be a mutual indwelling of the disciples with Jesus. The disciples will be loved by Jesus and by the Father. Jesus and the Father will abide with the disciples who continue to receive the revelation of Jesus. This describes the situation of the believing church to this day. But there is an “if.” The “if” is that disciples manifest their love for Jesus’ by heeding his commandment that they love one another.