

## **Easter: The Big Picture**

### **I. The Scriptures today and in the coming weeks help us begin to glimpse the Big Picture of Easter; --- the emergence of the New Community**

A. Today we hear of two resurrection appearances:

1. One, from the last chapter of the Gospel of John, of the risen Lord to his disciples who had gone back, --
  - a. no doubt out of desperation, \ to their old occupation – fishing. ---
2. The other appearance is to a Pharisee who was vigorously persecuting the first Christians, --
  - a. who was the most unlikely candidate we would imagine to become the chief missionary and theologian of the new community.
  - b. Saul discovers that his greatest success in his zeal for righteousness has become his greatest failure.  
(1. And that exactly is his complete transformation. ---

B. The Epistle reading is John's massive vision of the eternal worship of heaven – all humanity and creation joining together in worship before the throne of the "*Lamb who was slain.*"

C. Using our imagination we can begin to see the bigger picture that is emerging following the death and resurrection of Jesus.

1. The stories fit together to show a larger purpose that the risen Christ intended for his disciples and for the world.
2. There are greater things to come than they had seen.
3. In all this, we see the risen Lord alive and active – revealing the extraordinary love of God.
  - a. God's love present from the foundation of the world continues to this day, to draw you and me and all creation into the very life of God.

### **II. The Context in John's Gospel**

A. Through the season of Easter in the coming weeks we will be hearing from the Gospel of John.

1. The image of Jesus that we have in John's gospel shows a high concern about the future of the faith community.
    - a. Almost 1/5 of the narrative (*ch. 13-17*) is devoted exclusively to Jesus' words about the future of the faith community after his glorification.
    - b. These are the themes of the *Farewell Discourse* that we hear from in the coming weeks:
      - (1. How will the community live in his absence?
      - (2. What shape will their lives take?
      - (3. How will they endure persecution and the world's hatred?
      - (4. How will they experience Jesus' presence?
      - (5. What will be their identity as a people of faith?
    - c. The Fourth Evangelist gives these concerns a crucial place in the Gospel by locating them in the teachings of Jesus before his hour, as he says, "*so that when it does come, you may believe.*"
  2. Today these themes are introduced in a story from the last chapter (21) of John, a kind of "*epilogue*" to this gospel.
    - a. The story is an illustration in the disciples lives of what Jesus' promises mean for them after his glorification.
    - b. It's an appeal not to reduce the Christ to the past, to what they experienced with Jesus in and through his ministry.
- B. What Peter and the others and we too have to learn is that in his dying, Jesus is not now *absent* to them or to us – he has drawn infinitely *closer*. -----
1. The disciples are in a state of immobility. The loss of everything that mattered to them with the death of Jesus is mixed with shame in having abandoned him at his lowest hour. --
    - a. They must have felt little left to their shattered lives. –
    - b. Their instinct is to exert some control, go back to what they knew best. --
      - (1. Peter says it for the rest, "*I am going fishing.*"
      - (2. With eagerness and relief, the others immediately reply, "*We will go with you.*"
    - c. Back to the old life.
  2. And so they do.
    - a. And here it is where the disciples are given a lesson in resurrection.

- (1. All night they work,\ but nothing is gained,\ until the dawn, and a voice from the shore suggests a different direction,
  - (2. These were fishermen and Jesus speaks to their experience,\ to paraphrase, he says, "*Bring me what you do.*"
  - (3. And he does with it something beyond their expectations.
  - (4. There are fish everywhere!
  - b. It is the intuitive John who first realizes what is happening.
    - (1. "*It is the Lord!*"
  - c. Peter's response, true to character,\ is to say nothing,\ but do something.
    - (1. He grabs his work clothes and jumps into the water and wades to the shore. -----
- C. After the disciples bring in their huge catch Jesus invites them to bring some fish and he prepares a breakfast on the fire.
1. The hint of the story is that the meal is taken in silence, the disciples not daring to ask this figure, "*Who are you?*"
  2. Peter especially must have felt confused and exposed.
    - a. His denial of Jesus three times leaves an image of him as unfaithful at the end of the story before this epilogue.
  3. But Jesus singles him out and asks him, "*Do you love me?*"
    - a. Jesus sifts him with the question three times and each time Peter protests his love for Jesus.
    - b. In this exchange Peter faces his weakness and failure and only then is he prepared for the ministry to care for others to which Jesus calls him, "*Feed my sheep.*"
    - c. Far more important than Peter's denials and his impetuosity, is the grace of Christ.
- D. Resurrection is so tricky for all of Jesus' disciples.
1. It is the sin of the world, including our own that drives Jesus so far off into the distance of death on the Cross. --
  2. Jesus' Resurrection is so shocking because of what it tells us about his death and our sin.
    - a. Jesus travels into the very depths of our own darkness.
    - b. And even there,\ where we have become most isolated from God,\ Jesus brings the power and love of God.
  3. It is a reiteration of the prologue to this Gospel,

- a. *“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it”* (1:5).
  - b. This is what the resurrection tells us.
    - (1. Even in this place, where we could not bear to have him see us, he has come closest of all.
  - c. So he invites us into resurrection.
    - (1. At first it is hard to believe that he is truly with us -- more than ever before!
  - d. But to eyes of love which seek him and hunger for his company, he reveals himself.
    - (1. The vast quantity of fish in the disciple’s net and the gracious meal of bread and fish show that God’s gift is available now in the risen Jesus just as it was before.
4. Jesus’ ministry began in this Gospel with a miracle of unprecedented abundance, the turning of the water to wine at the Wedding in Cana.
- a. Now, John says, the Church can see its life and ministry also grounded in an experience of God’s fullness and the unprecedented, unexpected gift of acceptance and grace.

### **III. Worthy is the Lamb that was slain.**

- A. Through the 50 days of Easter in this liturgical year we also have a series of readings from the apocalypse of Revelation.
  - 1. In highly symbolic language, we encounter here the same theology of the cross that Paul articulates in 1 Cor.1: 23-25.
    - a. *God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.*
    - b. Throughout Revelation this insight energizes a consistent criticism of two realities in John’s world:
      - (1. the socio-economic world constructed by the ideology of Roman imperial might, and
      - (2. the idolatrous public worship that legitimated the regime in the imperial cult.
    - c. The revelation of God on the cross – *Christ crucified* – turns upside down the usual ideas of what constitutes power as well as sacrifice. –
  - 2. An apocalypse unveils that which otherwise remains hidden.
    - a. The apocalyptic vision of John asks the question,
      - (1. Who is the Lord of this world and worthy of worship?
      - (2. Is it the Roman emperor and all that he stands for?

- (3. Or is it the crucified one?)
  - b. The central claim of Revelation is that the power and honor that Rome take for granted actually belong to the “*Lamb who was slain...*”
  - c. The lamb embodies vulnerability and sacrifice.
    - (1. It is to the lamb that the heavenly chorus proclaims eternal glory.
    - (2. “*to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!*”
    - (3. Assigning worship to Christ dethrones the every day rule of violence.
  - c. Where is the hidden victory won by the death of Christ to be found? Where is it to be touched? Where is it to be grasped as real?
    - (1. One of Revelation’s answers to this question of where to find God in the world is that the liturgy of the church makes real the victory of Christ for those with eyes and ears of faith
    - (2. In worship, the Lamb’s eschatological reign is already experienced, in the praise of God who was, \ and is, \ and is in the process of coming.
  - 3. The response of those who have met the risen Lord is worship.
    - a. The worship of the Church on earth is a reflection of this heavenly liturgy, centered on the glorified Christ who fills heaven and earth. ---
    - b. And of course this is not just about the past. The choice of where and to whom we give our worship is just as real for us today.
- B. The passage read today, Rev. 5:11-14 in a brief few sentences is the culmination of the Gospel.
- 1. These verses were chosen by the composer Handel to close his magnificent oratorio, *The Messiah*.
  - 2. We usually think of the *Hallelujah Chorus* as the high point of this work,
    - a. but if you have a CD copy, go to the last chorus, “*Worthy is the Lamb.*”
    - b. Or, look up the *London Symphony Orchestra & Chorus with Sir Collin Davis* and play the final 7 minute finale.
    - c. In this inspired composition you can get a glimpse of the glory of John’s vision of the sacramental sign of the in-breaking Kingdom of God in the worship of the early church. And so it is for us today.