

Homily: Second Sunday of Easter
(May 1, 2011)

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

You may have noticed that our reading from the Acts of the Apostles is actually St. Peter's Pentecost sermon? Now why would the Church put a Pentecost sermon before us during Easter? Pentecost is at the end of Easter. Well, because his sermon was about Jesus' resurrection.

Regardless of the season we are, as John Paul II said, "an Easter people and 'alleluia' is our song." The resurrection informs all the seasons of the Church calendar, it infuses all of our preaching and teaching. Every Sunday of the year is, in fact a mini Easter, for every Sunday we celebrate our participation in the resurrection of Christ. To preach on the resurrection could be the *only* result when the Spirit descended upon the apostles.

And preach they did, in the languages of all the nations under heaven gathered in Jerusalem for the festival - Judeans, Mesopotamians, Cappadocians, Phrygians, Egyptians and so forth. Now from our perspective this was a wondrous miracle of God. But for some others they could only conclude that the apostles had hit the sauce a little earlier that morning.

They immediately write the miraculous off as drunken ranting, which of course affords them the opportunity to ignore what the apostles have to say, closing themselves off from words that might challenge the lives they are leading and the assumptions they are operating out of. I wonder how many prophets on our city streets have been written off by us?

Yet there are others who listen, who begin to question in their hearts how all of this is possible. These more theologically minded individuals ask, “What does this mean? If they are *not* crazy then this is God’s work and if that is so, then what might God be trying to say to us?”

Their inquiry reveals a willingness to be open to the radical leanings of God. Confronted with strangeness, these questioners do not turn away from the peculiar – as if God only speaks to his people through the socially accepted and established “norms” that are generally used to distinguish ‘us’ versus ‘them’; a convenient distinction for those who are comfortable in their apathy.

No, these ones who have the courage to question in their hearts just as St. Thomas did about the resurrection of Jesus, these are the best of what St. Benedict will later envision for his monastic communities. In his Rule Benedict says reminds us that the Spirit blows where it will. We cannot control it, nor can we predict its movements. All we can do is remain open to the extraordinary ways the Spirit speaks to us and moves us.

The Benedictine nun Joan Chittister develops this idea nicely. In her book *The Monastery of the Heart* she says:

We cannot damp down the fire of the Spirit on the basis of anything but the greater movement of the Spirit itself....In the Benedictine heart no door is closed, no lines are drawn....whoever makes enemies of differences, the seeker listens even harder to learn what differences have to teach, what otherness has to say” (pp. 73-79).

Free from prejudice and assumption, these questioners are like furrowed ground ready for planting and St. Peter seizes his moment. “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say.”

Having their attention he goes on to summarize what we will come to know as the Easter story: “Jesus of Nazareth [he says]...handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held by its power.”

This is the crux of our faith. It is the hinge upon which it all hangs. The recounting of these events which we still celebrate two thousand years later over the next fifty days, serves as the fundamental core of our existence and belief. The resurrection not only defines God, but it defines his Church.

What is interesting in this sermon is that Peter then quotes psalm 16, using it as a proof text, asserting that David’s words carry a dual meaning. The first and original meaning of course being the truth of God’s saving relationship with Israel. The second, which David could not have known, was that this relationship foreshadowed the life, death and resurrection of the Messiah, who is Jesus of Nazareth.

What Peter does here is anchor the truth of the resurrection in the scriptures of Israel, showing that Jesus is the fulfillment of the longings of the psalmist and the prophets, of kings and all the faithful throughout their long history with God. That the promise of redemption expressed in God’s saving acts – most especially in the Passover – has come to its fullness in the Passover of the Lamb of God.

The use of Psalm 16 adds a fuller dimension to Jesus’ resurrection. There are two major aspects to resurrection put forth at the end when the psalmist exclaims, “For you will not abandon me to the grave, nor let your Holy One see the Pit. You will show me

the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy, and in your right hand are pleasures for evermore.”

The first part deals of course with bodily death and life. This is certainly highlighted in Jesus’ appearances to his disciples. Our Lord did indeed die on the cross. His breath left his body, his heart stopped beating, his brain ceased to function – by all modern definitions we today possess to indicate death, Jesus met them. And yet, as the psalmist rejoices “...you will not abandon me to the grave, nor let your holy one see the Pit” three days later Jesus stood before his friends.

He who was dead was alive. He was the same but he was different. Though as God he could pass through locked doors, yet as a human he looked the same, felt the same, bore the same flesh along with the wounds from spear and nail. He even ate fish with them to prove he was the same Jesus of Good Friday.

But his resurrection is about more than bodily immortality. Notice what the psalmist says, “...in your presence there is fullness of joy, and in your right hand are pleasures for evermore.” There is a larger notion at work here than just immortality.

Resurrection is not just about the future. It has an immediate effect on the here and now by providing an opportunity to experience the present life in its fullness. We are an Easter people and ‘alleluia’ is our song. We are created and redeemed to live life to the hilt. We can do just this because death no longer brings fear; the terror of the Pit has been abolished.

This Pit that the psalmist talks about is called *Sheol* in Hebrew. It was a place seen to be located in the deep depths of the earth, which (if heaven is above as it was assumed

in ancient cosmology) was the point furthest point from the presence of God. And though it has often been associated with the netherworld or hell, its imagery really hearkens to a state of non-being.

Thus the Pit is a state of absence, of loneliness, a place of despair. Sheol is where lost souls become trapped in the darkness of their own fear and anxiety, unable to find hope, unable to find something to live for, unable to get over their selves.

The threat of the Pit however, is more than countered by the affirmation made by the Psalmist to God and embodied by Christ: "You did not abandon my life." Out of death has come bodily life for all eternity. So also out of despair, loneliness and absence, the light of the fullness of God's life has shone and it invites us to embrace that life in its fullness.

Again returning to my mentor St. Benedict he said, "...With the good gifts which are in us, we must obey God." We have been afforded a new start. We have been given the peace of mind that life finally wins and therefore we have nothing to fear. With this knowledge we can turn our minds and hearts to living this life out of the riches of God's grace, spreading the love and mercy around especially to those who have not heard the good news of Easter.

We have been invited as Joan Chittister says: "...[to] turn the compass point of the heart again to where God waits for us, arms open, full of mercy, made of love, to be our own best selves – not for our own sake alone but for the sake of the rest of the world."