

Easter Day Sermon 2008
Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24
Colossians 3:1-4; John 20:1-18

In the name of the Risen Lord, Amen.

The other night, I went to a presentation at the Pentecostal church down the road. The presentation was given by a Rabbi and afterward I talked with the Rabbi and my friend the pastor about the fact that we made a good beginning for a story. So ... A priest, a Pentecostal preacher, and a rabbi all served as chaplains to the students of a university. They would get together two or three times a week for coffee and to talk shop.

One day, someone made the comment that preaching to people isn't really all that hard. A real challenge would be to preach to a bear. One thing led to another, and, as men will do, they decided to each go out into the woods, find a bear, preach to it, and attempt to convert it.

Seven days later, they all came together to discuss their experiences.

Fr. Flannery, had his arm in a sling, was on crutches, and had various bandages on his body. He went first. "Well," he said, "I went into the woods and when I found a bear, I began to read to him from the Catechism. That bear wanted nothing to do with the Catechism and began to slap me around. So I quickly grabbed my holy water, sprinkled him and, Holy Mary Mother of God, he became as gentle as a lamb. The Bishop is coming out next week to confirm him."

Rev. Billy Bob spoke next. He was in a wheelchair, had one arm and both legs in casts. In his best fire-and-brimstone voice, he claimed, "WELL, brothers, you KNOW that we don't sprinkle! I went out and I FOUND me a bear. And then I began to read to my bear from God's HOLY WORD! But that bear wanted nothing to do with me. So I took HOLD of him and we began to wrestle. We wrestled down one hill, UP another and DOWN another until we came to a creek. So I DUNKED him and BAPTIZED his hairy soul. And just like you said, he became as gentle as a lamb. We spent the rest of the day praising Jesus and now he's coming to Wednesday evening Bible study."

The priest and the preacher looked down at the rabbi, who was lying in a hospital bed. He was in a body cast and in traction with IVs running into both arms. Summoning his strength, the Rabbi looked up and whispered, "Looking back on it, circumcision may not have been the best way to start."

St. John tells us a story of the first Easter that is unlike any of the other Gospel accounts. As is so typical of John's accounts, this one is full of detail. But also – as is always true of John, none of the details is without meaning.

For instance, John tells us the Mary Magdalene was the first at the tomb, and she went alone, so that when she discovered the empty tomb, she had to go back to the other disciples to tell them, rather than having other witnesses right there at hand. This leads to the wonderful, “holy foot race,” between Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved. Now what is the point of this little tidbit of information? Believe it or not there have been dozens of theories about it. Some have said that it was just to point out that St. Peter was older than St. John – that's why John was faster. Other theories have been much deeper – like the one from Rudolph Bultmann – that Peter represented Jewish Christians and John represented Gentile Christians, and the race, along with the interplay between the two at the tomb represented which branch of the early Church came to true faith first. Personally, I think it is one of those details that John puts in to give us an indication that this really happened. After all, if someone was going to make up an account of the empty tomb, why include a foot race between two disciples?

Anyway, John gets to the tomb first, and he doesn't go in. He looks in, but doesn't go in. Peter, who almost always represents you and me and the very human quality of sometimes acting without thinking, doesn't hesitate, he just barges right into the tomb. Then interestingly, John goes in, looks around *and believes*. So, according to the 4th

Gospel, the first person to believe in the resurrection was St. John – our patron saint. Of course, it doesn't hurt that St. John is also telling the story. But be that as it may, he looks in, sees the burial linens left behind and, rather than being confused like all the others, he believes.

But John does an odd thing for someone who now believes in the resurrection, he goes back home with Peter. And this is one of the themes of the crucifixion and resurrection stories in John, it was the women who consistently defied the authorities and stuck it out with Jesus while the men hid. That theme is carried out in this story. John and Peter return to the house where they're staying and Mary remains at the tomb, crying because she cannot find Jesus' body. Then she sees the resurrected Christ, even though she doesn't know that it is Him.

Jesus says one word, "Mary," and she knows who He is. The power in that one word is pretty amazing when you think about it. Mary has been standing in and around the tomb for some time. She has spoken with two angels. She has seen Jesus and not recognized Him, even after he has spoken, because remember He has already asked her why she is crying and whom she is seeking. That's another interesting Johanine detail. Jesus speaks to her and she doesn't recognize His voice, until He says that one word, "Mary."

One of many things that this Gospel account is trying to tell us by example, is a reiteration of what Jesus told the disciples in the 10th Chapter of John. Jesus said that He

was the Good Shepherd and that he called each of the sheep by name. He said, they know my voice and they will follow me. He calls each sheep *by name* and they know His voice and will follow Him. Jesus called Mary by name and she knew His voice and followed Him. On the road to Damascus, Luke tells us the Jesus called Saul by name and thereafter He followed Jesus as the Apostle Paul.

Jesus calls each of us by name. It won't be like it was in the old Bill Cosby comedy routine when God and Noah were talking with each other. There probably won't be a loud voice coming out of the clouds that won't let us ignore it until we do its bidding. Instead, it will probably be more like God's conversation with the prophet Elijah, when the voice of the Lord came to the prophet in the silence.

There is no doubting the magnitude and the magnificence of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. In an instant, all life on earth was changed forever, whether it knew it or not. The incarnation of God died on a cross, was buried and rose from the dead so that we might have the promise of eternal life, forgiven of our sins. That is monumental, beyond all description. But make no mistake – within all that magnificence is the call of God to us, through the work of Jesus Christ, in a still, small voice that we will instantly recognize. And that voice calls us to change.

Wherever we are, whatever we are doing, when that voice calls us by name it will change our lives forever, if we allow ourselves to be changed. The voice will say our name and if we are open to hearing it, we will be so filled with love, strength, faith – and

that peace which passes all understanding – that our lives will thereafter be dedicated to listening for that voice and spending our time trying to follow it wherever it leads.

The resurrection was a world altering event. But as Mary's story tells us, it was also a very personal event. Dry your tears. Stop searching for something that's not there. Listen as the resurrected Christ calls you by name. Then let the power of that call sink into your very soul, and go out, reborn as a disciple of Jesus Christ, and proclaim to the world that the Lord is risen and is alive. Dare to be changed at the calling of your name.

Amen.