Holy Thursday

We can do this. Let’s go through John’s Gospel, to get into the upper room with Jesus tonight.

Our first important question: What was Jesus up to?

Next: What did or didn’t Peter and the others understand? Who knows, we may have some of the same challenges in understanding ourselves!

Always important: Where would John like to lead us as he retells the story?

And most important of all: Given where I am right now, and where you are, where does Jesus want to lead us next?

It’s the last supper. Jerusalem is crowded. It is Passover, so Jews from all over have made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Holy Days. The population in the city has swollen to three times its normal size. The Romans troops and authorities are on edge: big crowd, religious fervor, anything can happen. Jesus and the disciples have found a place to share the meal. The candles are lit. They’ve settled in around the table.

Remember, John told us that ‘Jesus was fully aware that God had put everything in his power; that he had come from God, and was returning to God.’ Where did that awareness come from? Prayer throughout his ministry certainly helped. Communion with his Father. Spiritual attentiveness. He knows this will be the last supper. He knows what the days ahead hold for him. But the disciples have no idea.

So Jesus gets up, removes his outer garment, grabs a towel, a basin of water, and begins to wash the disciple’s feet. He is fully aware … remember, John made that very clear. Jesus is aware of who he is. He is tuned in to how much he loves these disciples, and everyone who will become a disciple in the centuries ahead. He knows what the next few days will bring. Is this washing their feet really just a fine lesson on hospitality, humility and service? Not quite. The connection to Passover, and to Jesus giving himself, his body and blood; to establishing the Eucharist is much tighter than that.

Ordinarily, a host would provide water for guests to wash their feet when they arrived. Dirty, dusty streets. Vendors tossing their trash in the byways. Animals roaming the streets all the time. No street cleaners to speak of. Folks wearing sandals. I get it. Washing your feet as you come into the house would be a very good thing. Occasionally a slave might assist, and then, if a meal was being served, you would proceed eventually to the dining area.

But the disciples have already settled in. It’s long past the time for washing feet. Jesus is fully aware, remember. Here is a hint. When Ezekiel or Jeremiah did something strange or unusually, was it just being quirky? No, God inspired them to perform an action that would make people sit
up and take notice. Often they would do something strange, folks would talk about it, and then as events unfolded, the light would go on: ‘Oh, that is what he was telling us!’ Just as Ezekiel performed unexpected actions as a way of prophecy, and Jeremiah performed prophetic actions, to reveal what God was about to do, Jesus is following in that tradition.

This is no incidental inspiration. Jesus will be down on his knees again on Friday, when he falls, carrying the cross. He will be humiliated. Will empty himself for his disciples, and for all. This servile gesture points, for those who know the story, to falling under the cross. It points to love that bears with doing demeaning things because you care so much. Love that is willing to sacrifice not only pride, but everything. It is about putting the other first, totally. No ‘who is most important’. No ‘that’s below my dignity.’ What a twist … real dignity is found in letting go of the need to be treated special!

How could the disciples really understand? They will one day, but not tonight.

How do we know this account is not just about washing feet? As I mentioned already, the timing, long after foot washing should have wrapped up, is one clue. More importantly though, how can Jesus tell Peter that without letting him do this, Peter will have no heritage with him? That’s way serious! Peter’s feet aren’t the issue. Peter has to accept Christ completing his mission. Humbling himself. Dying and rising. It is that self-emptying, and Peter accepting it as the only true path to glory that is essential. That is what will make Peter and the others (and us) clean. The paschal mystery, to be celebrated ever after in the Eucharist, that is how we are made clean.

Now to Peter. What did he and the others understand, or not understand? This will make so much more sense when we remember that at this point, Peter is a disciple (that means, a learner), not an apostle (the word means one sent on a mission). Not only that, Peter and the others are still at the bottom of the learning curve. Sure, they have heard Jesus tell parables. They have seen him perform miracles, signs, as John calls them. They have prayed with Jesus. But until Jesus dies and rises from the dead, how can they possibly connect all the dots?

Peter still has to learn about self-emptying. He has to see that it is necessary for Jesus to die and rise. How else can the power of sin be defeated? What is sin, but pride and self-centeredness? What better way to defeat it than the opposite: humility and self-emptying? And the victory over death? Death can’t be conquered by hiding from it: it has to be faced, even embraced for the battle to be won. How could a beginner understand that from one evening in the upper room?

Not only these mysteries. Like many a learner, Peter has so much to learn about himself. He needs to discover for himself just how easy it is to say: “I’m ready to lay down my life for you.”, and just how hard it is to grow strong enough to really do it. An important lesson. Peter will learn through his failure. Like Peter, we probably do have to fall a few times first. It is so easy to say “I love you.” So hard to live like we really mean it. “This is my body, given up for you, this is my blood, poured out for you”.

Peter will get it, but long after this night. One day we’ll fully understand too.

I believe John wants us to take a serious look at Peter’s reluctance to having Jesus wash his feet. After all, aren’t we reluctant to have anyone wash ours? It is hard to accept someone willingly,
humbly kneeling before us to serve us. Too much love and humility can be scary. And certainly accepting that Jesus must undergo the passion just for me, just for you, is certainly a mystery that takes time to grow into and embrace.

But for many of us, this is not our first time going to the upper room. It’s not our first Holy Thursday. John doesn’t want us to just identify with Peter at the bottom of the learning curve, he want us to move along the curve. We need to get from allowing Jesus to kneel before us, allowing our feet to be washed, to accepting that he died for us, to giving all of this a try ourselves. From hearing about Eucharist, to celebrating and sharing the Eucharist, to becoming the body of Christ in this world.

Jesus’ words are pretty clear. If I am ready to do this for you, you must do it for one another.

So we do our best to let go of pride. To let go of focusing on ourselves. We look at the dirty feet, look at wherever humble service is needed, and we step up to the plate. Not only has Jesus shown the way. He will help us find inside what we need to empty ourselves, to embrace humility, even if at times it is only through circumstances we can’t avoid. Just a little courage, and we can discover the true glory that comes in serving, not being served. We find our life in giving it away. Bring things to prayer, and we can find glory, we can discover we are side by side with Jesus in doing the most mundane, humble tasks. Side by side, in communion. That is well up the learning curve.

If we stay with it, if we really give this foot washing, humble, loving service thing a go, it will lead us to the ultimate destiny of the paschal mystery. With Jesus, we will overcome sin, pass beyond the power of death, and rise to a new life; we grow to understand the Eucharist, to share the Eucharist, to become Eucharist. Hang in there, and Easter will come.

So now to the last question I raised at the beginning: Where does Jesus want to lead us? Through the Gospel, through the foot washing, through the Eucharist we will shortly celebrate, Jesus wants to lead us back to our daily life.

We don’t stay in the upper room, any more than Peter James and John could stay on the Mount of the Transfiguration. We go back to our daily life, but no longer with eyes so dim. He has opened our eyes. It is possible to see the menial, mundane things that could be just a cause for boredom, as instead a place for transformation. Those menial tasks, cleaning up after others, changing linens, washing clothes, preparing meals, day to day work, things we may dream of avoiding may be just the place where the Paschal mystery will suddenly open up before us. Those things may be just the place where we are offered an opportunity to enter the Paschal mystery with Jesus. Invited to die with him, and in the most unlikely places, rise with him. We encounter Jesus, he takes us by the hand, and leads us to Easter peace and the joy of the Gospel.

One last reason to be immensely grateful in our Eucharist tonight. We have a huge advantage over Peter. We not only do we have Jesus sharing the last supper with us. We have St. John helping us understand all that he, Peter and the others began to understand after the resurrection. We also all know people who have made the journey. Folks who have hesitated at first, then let Jesus wash their feet, they’ve given it a try themselves, and they have loved us with that self-
emptying love. Thank you Lord, for the Communion of the Saints, for the witness of others who have been shaped by and who live these mysteries!

Good Friday

Well, here we all are this afternoon. That tells me something.

We all want to join the three Mary’s, and the beloved disciple at the foot of the cross. We want to mourn with them. To let the sorrow touch us. We want to enter into this overwhelming mystery of our redemption. To discover in the process the amazing love Christ has revealed, the love and mercy he offers to us. The love he calls us to live. And we shall. We will approach the cross, share the reverence, the sorrow, the love, the faith, the communion with our merciful Savior. But first, let me say just one word about the people Mathew, Mark, Luke and John DON’T tell us about in their Passion accounts.

They tell us about Pilate. About the High Priest. About the other Jerusalem authorities. We hear about the soldiers. Simon of Cyrene. The two thieves crucified with Jesus. Crucial characters in the events of that day, no doubt.

But there were thousands in Jerusalem for the Passover. As Jesus was being crucified, some of those others were thinking about their trip back home, after the Holy Days were over. Innkeepers may well have been assessing whether this was as profitable a Passover as last year. A number of folks may have heard there had been some trouble, and that three men ended up being crucified, but they probably wanted to put that out of their mind as quickly as possible and get on with things. But that isn’t us. We are here today, listening to the Passion, ready to approach the cross.

After the 147 young people were massacred in Kenya yesterday, their families were overwhelmed with grief. There are people around the world who share some measure of the sorrow today. But sadly, many folks heard the report, gave it 5 minutes of attention, and moved on. Christ is still crucified in our world today. Some tune in, others tune out.

In the history of the Roman Empire, Good Friday was hardly the most gruesome day ever. After putting down the 3rd slave revolt, a hundred years previous, Rome crucified 6,000 slaves, lining the road from Capua to Rome. Their bodies were left hanging there as a warning. Rebellion will not be tolerated. You cannot go against the rich and powerful. Punishment will be swift and merciless. Now of course Roman citizens were never crucified. Only the lowest classes; slaves, lowly foreigners. It was about making sure, in the most humiliating way possible, that the lowly know their place, and stay there. Quite a contrast with how Jesus treated the poor, the outcast, sinners, and those of little account.

Public humiliation, degradation, capital punishment – it has been used throughout history. In theory, it is supposed to be a deterrent to the most threatening, most heinous crimes. But it is almost always applied to the lowest classes, sending a social and political message. There is also that appeal to the lowest part of our human nature – revenge and retribution.
St. John Paul II made the point, included in the Catechism, that in our advanced societies, there are means to keep society safe without capital punishment, and therefore the circumstances in which capital punishment could be justified are now very rare, it not practically none-existent. Pope Francis has reiterated that given the culture of death that grips so much of our world today, it is time to end capital punishment. But for some, capital punishment is a hard thing to let go. This is not just about politics. I believe the message of Good Friday has something to offer here.

Christ is still crucified in our world today. Seeing human life as expendable, failure to reverence human life has consequences far deeper than most folks care to look. If it is perfectly fine to execute criminals, even after it has been discovered that many condemned are innocent (remember our readings today?), it sends a message that killing is a useful tool. Now, the culture of death around us has created monsters who see executing people not as a way to maintain social order, but to turn it upside down, and create fear and terror. Turn the power of death against the folks in power – that’s the way to get into power.

Why do we need to stare this evil in the face? Because at the heart of the mystery we celebrate today is a very different message than Rome crucifying slaves, or ISIS torturing and killing men, women and children; Christians, fellow Muslims who are Shiites, and any others who fail to embrace their extremist views.

Might makes right is a very common way of understanding power. One might even think it is the first principle of politics. It IS a colossal temptation to think that way. I suspect it is a principle somehow embedded in our brain stem, our reptilian brain.

But what we encounter upon the cross is a very different kind of power. The power of love. Instead of returning harm for harm, hate for hate, even death for death, the power of the cross is just the opposite. Christ loved so much that he absorbed all the venom thrown at him. The jealousy, the mockery, the condemnation, the beating, the crucifixion. He absorbed it, transformed it into a passion to forgive, and in a way that we can only understand through the gift of grace, the sting was removed. As St. Paul writes to the Corinthians: Oh death, where is your victory? Oh Death, where is your sting?

If the only place to see this divine form of power is cross, then I am not so sure our time here today would be that well spent. But Christ didn’t just exercise that form of power, he gave it to his disciples when he breathed the Holy Spirit upon them. He has given it to us as well.

Paul exercised this paradoxical power when he gave up hunting Christians down, joined them, and suffered being thrown out of the synagogue, endured beatings, ship wrecks, imprisonment, and finally martyrdom. St. Peter discovered how to tap into this kind of power, leading the church, suffering martyrdom, yet ultimate replacing the pagan Roman Empire. We have many feast days of martyrs that we celebrate. Not for their failure, but for their victory.

We have other examples to consider as well, closer to home. A parent lets an out of control teen rage, but keeps on loving them. Eventually, the realization that they are really and truly loved sinks in. The relationship goes to a new level. So much more effective than throwing a kid out on the street. Taking care of a parent with dementia, a loving daughter or son puts up with fits when
mom or dad isn’t himself or herself. Being irrational and turning on others can be part of the disease. But caregivers keep on loving, and grace is set loose, for all involved.

Relationships can be lived out as one person controlling another, and sadly that is the only kind of relationship some folks have ever known. But Christ teaches us about a different approach to relationships, where love, not control or superiority rules the day. How can it be that a way that appears so weak can actually be the only way that conquers sin and death, that creates relationships that stretch into eternity? As the little black books would put it, spend some time talking it over with Christ. Prayer is the only way to really understand.

When we approach the cross in veneration, it isn’t because crucifixion is a great form of capital punishment. We venerate the cross as the place were Jesus revealed what true power, the power of divine love can accomplish. It is a symbol of redemption, of mercy, of a powerful form of love we cherish, and pray the Lord helps us to life. Here sin, hatred, jealousy, arrogance, and death itself was defeated. I can’t put it better than Tim Keller, in his book, The Reason for God:

The pattern of the Cross means that the world’s glorification of power, might, and status is exposed and defeated. On the Cross Christ wins through losing, triumphs through defeat, achieves power through weakness and service, comes to wealth via giving all away. Jesus Christ turns the values of the world upside down.

So much to pray for today!

Easter Vigil

God saw that it was good. Earth and sky. Sun, moon and stars. Oceans teaming with life, fruit and flower, and all living creatures, great and small. The human family. You and me. God found it very good. I have to agree. Whether walking in the countryside, traveling near or far, looking out at all of you every week at Mass. It is very good!

God provided the sheep for Abraham’s sacrifice. God provides the perfect sacrifice every time we offer the Eucharist at this altar.

God led the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, to freedom. In our baptism, God leads us out of the grip of sin and death, into the freedom of a life of grace, lived in a loving, forgiving community.

We just sang about it: God shows us the path of life, God sets us free.

Lest we forget, Isaiah reminded us: God establishes a covenant of peace with us, calls us to refreshing waters, invites us to a feast.

Ezekiel, Ezekiel – thank you for the beautiful image: our being sprinkled with clean water, given a new heart. I have felt it happen – the refreshment, the cleansing, the new heart beating inside. I hope you have too.
And oh, St. Paul, my brother Paul!! I treasure your letters. Who else could so beautifully draw the line from our baptism, dying and rising with Christ, the old self, slave to sin, crucified, to our union with Christ in the resurrection, our living for God in Christ Jesus.

You know of course that St. Paul didn’t just write about these things. He helped people in Corinth, in Philippi, in Galatia and all around the Eastern Mediterranean to discover the new life, to support one another in that life, and to call others into community, into communion, into a life of grace. He’s still doing it today!

Tonight we have had the opportunity to listen, to reflect, and to sing our way through the ages, through salvation history. We’ve entered into the discoveries about God’s love, from the first realization of creation as a gift to the gift of new creation every time people approach the baptismal font.

And then we have our Gospel tonight. I have no doubt that Mary Magdalen and her two friends went, heartbroken, to Jesus’s tomb. I can just imagine them trying to figure out – through the tears, how will we ever roll back that huge stone, so that we can anoint his body?? Then to see the stone rolled away, to see the angelic figure. “He has been raised, just as he told you.” How many times, to how many people did they repeat the story?

Just as in the layout of our Easter season readings, going to the empty tomb became a great prelude to sharing about seeing Christ after his death, alive, risen; touching his resurrected & glorified body, sharing meals with him, being sent to proclaim the Good News.

Tomorrow morning we’ll hear a passage in the Acts of the Apostles about those who experienced all Christ did in his earthly ministry, and who then were chosen to be witnesses to his resurrection, his teaching before ascending to the Father, to the meals he shared with them after he rose from the dead.

But if you want to really be able to sing ‘Jesus Christ is Risen Today’ as our celebration ends tonight. Here is the secret.

Those readings are not just intended to be a recitation of history. We aren’t just re-enacting things from long ago. God is continuing to create this very minute, with every new star born in the universe, with every seed that breaks open, every blossom that blooms, every new born baby that cries. God is still saying, it is good. And we can share in God’s seeing the goodness every day.

God is still providing the sacrifice at hundreds of thousands of altars tonight, tomorrow, and year after year.

God is still leading people out of slavery, and there is hope for those in slavery this very minute, wherever they are, whatever kind of slavery.

The call to the water, and to the feast, is ringing out this very moment.

That new heart Ezekiel speaks of is meant to beat in us.
The stone has been rolled away, the tomb is empty. Jesus has risen from the dead, just as he said. But we don’t have to go to Galilee to experience him, to eat with him.

First, he is about to baptize Rachel and Ashley into new life. He will sprinkle all of us with clean water. He will pour out the Spirit on Rachel Ashley, Honus and Taylor. And finally he will be the host, the sacrifice, the priest making the offering, giving us his body and blood. We will eat with the Risen Lord tonight. And then he will send us forth with Alleluias, because he has chosen us to be his witnesses. To share the Good News with our sisters and brothers.

Let’s have at it!