

EASTER SUNDAY HOMILY – YEAR A
“New Creation through Faith and Forgiveness”
(Acts 10:34, 36-43; Psalm 118; Col 3:1-4; John 20:1-18)

Years ago as director of the renewal team for our diocese of Keewatin-The Pas (KRT), I accidentally drove within 15 feet of a school bus in Creighton, Sask. The policeman who was right told me that offence involved a mandatory court appearance. A few days later, there I was in court, a priest, director of a diocesan renewal team, appearing before a judge. The fine was \$250.00. Not having the money to pay at the time, I was put on fine-option and was able to work off my fine. In case you are wondering, I did 55 hours of voluntary ministry that I would not normally do, such as a family retreat and a Deeper Search Weekend. (I did not count confessions and celebrating the Eucharist!)

What reminded me of this incident, embarrassing at that time but humorous now, is St. Paul’s comment in the first reading about Jesus “ordained by God to judge the living and the dead.” He goes on to state that those who believe in him “receive forgiveness of sins through his name.” Earlier he had proclaimed that same Jesus as Lord of all and source of peace.

This is a new kind of judgment from a different kind of judge than the one who handed me my fine-option sentence. The gospel adds to that newness. “Early on the first day of the week” was the opening line. That, coming from the author of the Fourth Gospel, St. John, takes us back to Genesis, to the first creation. The message from John is clear - the resurrection of Jesus is an absolutely new reality, a new creation, a new beginning.

Today, Easter Sunday morning, we are invited to be part of that new creation. We are invited by John to be like him, to come to the empty tomb and believe. We are invited to be like Mary Magdalene, to encounter the risen Jesus, to be called by name, to participate in the reality of his ascension to the Father.

In short, we are invited into the new creation established by Jesus, by becoming a new creation ourselves through faith and forgiveness.

In the gospel account, the evidence of the burial cloths suggests that the body of Jesus has not been stolen, and has a more important meaning: the resurrection of Jesus is not like the raising of Lazarus, who emerged from the tomb still wrapped in his burial cloth and had to be freed from his burial wrappings at Jesus’ command. In contrast, the burial cloth of Jesus remains behind in the empty tomb, making the point that no one has taken Jesus away – he has left death behind.

The second reading from Colossians makes the same point. Through faith in Christ risen from the dead, we have “also died and our life is now hidden with Christ in God.” To share in that new creation, we must let go of the burial cloths of our sin and sinfulness, die to that sin, and rise to a new life with Christ.

The New Interpreters Bible tells us that in this first story about the resurrection of Jesus, we are given two scenes through which to ponder the resurrection: the empty tomb and the appearance to Mary.

With regard to the empty tomb, John provides only the stark emptiness of the empty tomb and the telltale presence of Jesus' abandoned burial clothes, yet the beloved disciple believes. Why? He believes, because he already believes in Jesus and the trustworthiness of Jesus' promises about himself and God, so when he saw the empty tomb, he knew, without being certain about what form it would take, that Jesus had defeated death. It is important that the contemporary Christian community heed this story and linger, like John, with the witness of the empty tomb before moving ahead to other stories of the risen Jesus.

The second scene of Mary Magdalene recognizing Jesus in the garden captures in a poignant way the promise of Jesus to turn our sorrow into joy. Yet this moment of pure joy is the beginning, not the end, of Mary's encounter with the risen Jesus. The good news that Jesus commands Mary to proclaim is not that he is risen, but that he is ascending to "my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." The cross brings the incarnation to a close, but the story of Jesus the Word of God, finds its conclusion only in his return to God, which is the counterpart to his descent from heaven.

This return makes new life possible for the believing community, because Jesus' ascent to God renders permanent that which was revealed about God during the incarnation. The love of God in Jesus was not of temporary duration, lasting only as long as the incarnation. Rather, the truth of Jesus' revelation of God receives its final seal in his return to God.

Cross/resurrection/ascension is the decisive revealing event for John, because it forever changes the way God is known in the world and makes God's new age a reality. Everything begins with Jesus' relationship to the Father, and there is no conversation about "us" until there is a conversation about "them" – God and Jesus. The source of new life now lies with God as revealed in Jesus, and for the Fourth Evangelist, there is no short cut around serious theological reflection about the identity of God and Jesus.

The announcement Jesus makes of his ascension is astonishing and of critical importance because through it, the believing community receives a new identity. His ascension is the confirmation that the believing community now knows God as Jesus knows God; that Jesus has opened up the possibility of a new and full relationship with God. The intimacy of Jesus' relationship with God the Father now marks the believing community's relationship with God. While speaking Mary's name shows the transforming power and intimacy for one of his sheep, Jesus' announcement of his ascension opens up that transforming power and intimacy to all the members of the believing community. Jesus' death on the cross, his revelation of God's love, his resurrection and ascension are indeed ultimately about us, because they open up for those who believe fresh, new possibilities of life as children of God. These events are also about God, for it is only as one sees God in Jesus that one can know what it means to live as God's child.

The Fourth evangelist himself, John, is an example of that new life in Christ. St. Peter has many roles in the gospel of John, but the beloved disciple, never named, has only one role – to embody the love and intimacy with Jesus that is the goal of discipleship in John.

It is fitting that it should be Mary Magdalene who is given the commission to go and announce, not just that Jesus has risen, but that he is ascending to the Father, into that new reality he waits to share with us. She is the one who was said to have had seven demons in her. She had experienced his forgiveness; had known his love, and now becomes the first evangelist of this new creation.

A cute story captures the spirit of this gospel. One Easter, two young parents were trying to explain the resurrection of Jesus to their 6-year-old son. But Joey would have none of it. “Nope,” he insisted, “when you’re dead, you’re dead.” His parents were patient and finally persuaded Joey that Jesus really did rise from the dead. A bright look came into his eyes and suddenly Joey made a beeline for the telephone with a look that was both intense and happy. When his parents asked who he was calling, he replied, “Does Grandpa know about this? I gotta tell him!”

Our challenge is simple: to believe, to surrender, to let go of sin, to open ourselves up to receive the forgiveness that flows abundantly and unconditionally from this new kind of judge who loves instead of punishes. Why wait another moment? Let us enter into this new creation now, today.

The Eucharist that we now celebrate is itself a going into the empty tomb with faith. It is in itself an encounter with the Risen Lord who forgives us and shares with us, right here and now, through the living Word and the Bread of Life, that new life flowing from the resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

So let us be like John and Mary. Let us also believe, receive God’s forgiveness, and live in that new creation that began Easter morning centuries ago and continues within us to this day.