

HOMILY EASTER SUNDAY YEAR B – Homily 02*

“Lessons from the Linen Cloth”

(Acts 10:34, 37-43; Ps 118; Colossians 3:1-4/1 Corinthians 5:6-8; John 20:1-18)

Did Jesus really rise from the dead or was his body stolen?

The answer to this question lies in the linen burial cloth, a cloth that teaches us three key lessons: believe, repent and heal.

The first lesson the linen burial cloth teaches us is to believe in the resurrection of Jesus.

In today’s gospel, Mary Magdalene saw a stone rolled away and an empty tomb; she concluded that the body of Jesus had been stolen. She did not yet believe. At her word, however, Peter and John ran to the cemetery and went right into the tomb. We are told that John *saw and believed*. What did John see?

John saw the linen burial cloth and head cloth lying where Jesus was laid. What John understood was that Jesus had burst out of the burial cloth, leaving them behind like a deflated air mattress. Had someone stolen the body of Jesus, they would have taken the body as it was, wrapped with the burial cloth. John concluded that Jesus could not have been stolen – he had risen from the dead as he said he would. John was the first to see, and believe.

We are also invited to believe if we want to experience the new life that is Easter. The gospel tells us that it was early on the first day of the week, before dawn, that Mary went to the tomb. That is a clear statement in the gospel of John that this is something entirely new, a new creation, the first day of a whole new reality. The key for us to share in that new reality is faith in the resurrection of Jesus. He is Risen. The linen cloth first of all teaches us to believe.

The second lesson the linen burial cloth teaches us is to repent.

When Jesus first began to preach, he spoke these words: “Repent and believe, the Kingdom of God is near.” In short, the key to entering the Reign of God is faith that leads to repentance.

In the first reading today, I believe that is what Peter had in mind. With great excitement Peter shared his witness, his *kerygma*, his first proclamation of the Good News. He roots this new, awesome event of the resurrection of Jesus in history. It is Jesus of Nazareth who was raised, he whom God had anointed to do good and to perform miracles. This Jesus was crucified but has indeed risen. The Apostles ate and drank with him after his resurrection, attesting to the fact that this is indeed the Jesus of Nazareth who is now risen Lord. Then Peter states categorically and clearly that everyone who believes in him will receive forgiveness of sins through his name.

St. Paul gets even more radical in the second reading. If by baptism we have also been raised with Christ, he asserts, then we must also follow his pattern and die like him. What we are called to die to, however, is sin. We are to leave our sin, the things of earth behind, so that our life can be hidden with Christ in God.

I sincerely believe that the best way we can do this is through sacramental confession which leads to genuine forgiveness, healing and reconciliation. It is a process in which we repent, name our sin, empty ourselves of that sin by giving it to another human being, receive the forgiveness of Jesus, pray for healing and seek to make amends.

The second lesson of the linen burial cloth is a call to radical repentance, a radical conversion, so that we can experience the new life of Easter with Christ who is forgiveness. The resurrection completes the forgiveness of Jesus on the cross, showing that it is forgiveness that leads to new life, but only faith, love and repentance gives it to those who believe.

The third lesson that the linen burial cloth teaches us is to heal.

The gospel begins with a Mary Magdalene who thinks the body of Jesus has been stolen. It ends with a Mary Magdalene who not only believes that Jesus is Risen but also with a Mary Magdalene who is invited to set out on a healing journey as an integral piece of the resurrection story and the new life of Easter.

While she is weeping and mourning after the Apostles return to their homes, Jesus appears to her as a living person, not wrapped in burial cloth. She recognizes him when he calls her by name. She falls and wraps her arms around his feet. The response of Jesus is to ask her not to cling to him.

What Jesus is saying to her, and to us, is that she cannot have him back the way she had him before, as the historical Jesus. He was the same, yet he was different. Now he was the Risen Lord who would share his Spirit with her, the same Spirit that raised him from the dead. But she must first learn to let him go. He was teaching her to have faith, to grieve and mourn the loss of the Jesus she knew and let him go, let him ascend to the Father. Only then would He be able to send his Spirit to those who believe. Only then would she be able to receive His Spirit to be with her always in a new and even better way than he was present to her before. And that is the new life of Easter, the presence of the love and forgiveness of Jesus with us always through His Spirit.

So the third lesson the linen burial cloth teaches us is to heal. We are given the same invitation as that extended to Mary Magdalene. When faced with losses in our lives, we must also have faith, mourn and grieve our losses, then let them go so that we can receive the Spirit of Jesus for the particular losses in our lives.

To sum up, the three lessons of the linen burial cloth are to believe, to repent and to heal. To believe in the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus is to participate in it, to die with him so we can rise with him. To die to our favorite sins will be like a death, a ripping apart, a letting go of that which was part of our lives for so long as we survived life here on earth. This is a radical reconciliation. Through faith, repentance and healing, we have died and are now with God in heaven, already here on earth. We must believe, go into the empty tomb, confess our sins, receive the forgiveness of Jesus, move on to heal, to grieve and mourn our losses, and let them go to enjoy the new life of Easter

As a missionary Oblate priest, my method when in a new area of ministry was to visit each home, introduce myself and practice my Cree. One day when I knocked on one door, a man answered and as soon as he realized that I was a priest, he began to swear at me and tell me to go and run a residential school. Then he began to shout "Get the hell out of here!" I thought he was talking to the dogs at my feet, but when I looked up and saw that he was reaching for something. I thought to myself that he was getting a gun. I turned and retreated as quickly as I could to my car. I looked over my shoulder and saw that he was standing on the porch, swinging a hockey stick wildly in the air and still shouting and swearing at me. I drove away shaken to the core, amazed at the depth of anger in the man.

As time went by I inquired discretely about him and was told that he was very angry and that he had been abusive towards many people. I pondered how I would be able to approach him to bring some kind of healing and closure to this painful situation. Then I learned that he was in the hospital in Edmonton with cancer. Before I made a trip to Edmonton I learned that he had been sent home to die.

I determined to visit him before I left for Kenya, where I had been invited to give some workshops to the young men wanting to join the Oblates. I finally worked up the courage to visit him one day. He was lying in bed talking on a cell phone as I entered his room and motioned with his head towards a chair. I thought to myself that was a good sign. When he hung up, he started talking about being sick and how that gave him a lot of time to think. Then he said that he realized he had a lot of people he had to say he was sorry to. I wondered to myself if he remembered the incident between us.

Suddenly he blurted out, "I am sorry for what I did to you that day you came to my house, Father." I was shocked and delighted, said I forgave him, shook his hand and told him I had meant to ask him the reason for his anger – was it his residential school experience. He said no, he didn't have too bad an experience at the school, but that he had lost all his school buddies to alcohol, drugs, suicide or violent death. That was the source of his anger expressed towards me that day. I apologized to him for the harm any of our staff might have done at the schools. I expressed regret for the flawed system of the schools and the colonial policy of assimilation by the government. We shook hands again and as I left he told me that I should take kids to the powwows and get the Church fixed up on his home reserve. I could hardly believe this was the same man I had encountered on that fateful day. As I drove away I was filled with peace and joy, realizing that this man was entering the Kingdom of Heaven. He was, through his apology and forgiveness, being reconciled with God and with others.

In Kenya for the sessions I was giving there at the pre-novitiate, Bro. Harley Mapes OMI asked me why I did not stay in Africa, as unlike Canada, they had a harvest of vocations. I shared this story with him, and mentioned that I would not stay in Kenya where there was a harvest of vocations, because in Canada we were hoping for a harvest of reconciliations, which was just as great a need.

The Eucharist we celebrate this Easter Sunday is in itself an experience of faith, forgiveness and healing. We believe that Jesus is present in Word and Sacrament. We receive his forgiveness. We are strengthened and transformed into his Body, sent out to spread the Good News that He is indeed Risen.

So let us take to heart the lessons that the linen burial cloth of Jesus teaches us today – to believe in him as Risen Lord; to repent of our sin and to heal of our sinfulness so that we can truly experience, like Peter, John and Mary Magdalene, the new life of Easter.