

HOMILY FOR “GOOD SHEPHERD SUNDAY”  
FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER – APRIL 29, 2007

Introduction

At our community on Holy Saturday morning we traditionally gather for prayer and role play the different personages who were present at Jesus’ agony and crucifixion. This year, for example, one of us spoke as if he were a Roman soldier assigned to duty on the day of Jesus’ death; another took the part of Simon from Cyrene; yet another was Barabbas and another Mary Magdalene.

The format is simple. We have no script. Each speaks in turn from what she or he thinks the particular eyewitness might have said the day after that first Good Friday. We never fail to have a vigorous dialogue and this year was no exception.

I

The Roman soldier and to some extent Simon from Cyrene held forth on the finality of Jesus’ death. “It’s over and done with. He’s buried and that is that. We might as well go back to business as usual—the Gallileans returning to Gallilee—and forget about this Jesus who died a disgraceful death.” “Barabbas”, however, had a little different view. He said that Jesus and he had met, just as they were letting him free and something had awakened in “Barabbas” at that moment. He said he wanted to stick around with the little group of Jesus’ followers.

“Mary Magdalene” insisted on recalling Jesus’ statement that he would rise from the dead. This was received by the others with cynicism, however. They told “Mary” to “forget it; he’s dead and well buried” but the more they scoffed, the more she held on to Jesus’ words “destroy this temple and in three days I will rebuild it”. She insisted that he was speaking about the temple of his own body.

II

As the dialogue went back and forth this way, “Mary Magdalene” said a curious thing. She proposed that all of us there wait for a couple of thousand years “to see what will happen”. The rest sort of laughed at this, because even in this playacting mode it was a strange thing to say. One of the participants said: “You mean we’ll have to wait until the year 2007 to see how this all turned out”. And she said yes.

Her remark stuck with me throughout that Holy Saturday. In the evening of that same day, the Easter Vigil of 2007, millions of Christian-Catholics throughout the world lit the Paschal Candle with the words:

“Christ yesterday and today

“the beginning and the end

“Alpha and Omega.

“All time belongs to Him and all the ages;

“to Him be glory and power  
“through every age forever.”

### III

And here we are on this Fourth Sunday of Easter listening to Jesus’ word: “My sheep hear my word and I know them and they follow me” (John 10:27).  
He is truly risen – He is our shepherd. He overcame death and lives.

This is a motive for great rejoicing, for singing Alleluias – or to paraphrase one ancient father of the Church, the Easter Season is like having fifty Sundays in a row from Resurrection Day to Pentecost.

### Conclusion

Let me finish by telling an Easter story. On a grim November night in 1989 six Jesuit priests and two of their women collaborators were brutally murdered at the University of Central America in the city of San Salvador by elements of the army there. Their crime seems to have been the work they had been carrying on to bring peace to that tortured country.

Another member of that community, theologian Fr. Jon Sobrino, was not present when the crime happened; in fact he was half way around the world in Asia giving a series of lectures. He heard of the tragedy in his community when a friend called him from London and of course he immediately set out for El Salvador.

His journey back took him through Washington, DC and several of us who knew Jon went to meet him. We fully expected that we would find a broken man, someone who had lost his community, his friends, brother Jesuits - collaborators in the great work being done at the University of Central America. We did in fact encounter in Fr. Sobrino a man grieving for the terrible loss he had suffered.

However, at a certain point in our conversation, Jon said these words: “I am convinced that life not death has the final word”. And he repeated them: “Death is not the last chapter, life is”. I watched Sobrino closely to see if he was saying those words because we expected them from him. But his manner was totally serious and almost transparent: he really believed that something good would come from the assassination of his brother Jesuits and their two women collaborators. (As indeed it did. Within a year or two of the killings talks on ending the war in El Salvador came to a successful conclusion.)

In a real way we who know the Resurrection of Jesus understand the truth of what Fr. Sobrino said that day in Washington, DC. They were Easter words and each of us could speak them.