

Easter Sunday, Year A  
April 26, 2011 ~ Matthew 28: 1-10  
Fr. Jim Cook

## “Hope Wins!”

On Friday morning, my wife Peggy, showed me the front page of *The Kansas City Star*. Prominently displayed above the fold, were four pictures superimposed over a picture of the planet Earth, taken from space.

The first picture had the caption, “radiation fears in Japan,” and showed a young child crying in his mother’s arms, while a gloved and suited man scanned the child for excess radiation.

The second picture had the caption, “crude oil in the Gulf of Mexico,” and showed a pair of boots, ankle-deep in oil-clogged water.

The third picture had the caption, “smog from Russian wildfires,” and showed a group of teenaged girls, standing in what I think is a public plaza, each wearing a blue mask over her mouth and nose.

And the fourth picture, probably the worst of the bunch, had the caption, “toxic sludge in Hungary,” and showed a young man standing behind a rural house, wading very nearly up to his knees in a reddish-orange swill, using a shovel to push away the swilly-sludge.

When I saw those four photos, over a photo of a seemingly beautiful and pristine earth, my heart sank. Maybe you saw it, and maybe you felt the same way.

Some days, I wish that the human race could get a do-over, and start things all over again from scratch. Well, today’s Bible readings have given me a glimmer of hope, and I’d like to explain.

In our reading from Matthew’s gospel, early on that first Easter Sunday morning, “Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.” I believe that the so-called “other Mary” was the sister of Martha and Lazarus of Bethany. It just makes sense to me, because *that* Mary and her siblings were dear friends of Jesus, and it would be natural for her to want to be at her friend’s tomb as soon as she was able.

But when Mary arrived at the tomb, it was empty. I can see her standing there, looking bewildered. And I wonder, as she looked at Jesus' empty tomb, if the image of her brother Lazarus' empty tomb flashed in her mind.

Lazarus had died just a couple of weeks earlier, but Jesus had raised him from the dead. And now, here she was looking at another empty tomb. Did she wonder what it all meant? Two empty tombs in as many weeks. Was it a sign? If so, of what?

Lazarus *was* dead, but now his tomb stands empty. Jesus was dead, and now *his* tomb stands empty. I can see her standing there, thinking about these things, and then I can imagine this faint glimmer of hope crossing her face.

**I**n the sixth century B.C., Israel was conquered by a foreign power, and a significant portion of their population — mainly their leaders, the wealthy, and the skilled craftsmen — were taken away into exile. About sixty years later, they were allowed to go home.

However, their excitement and joy, at the prospect of returning to their homeland, was quashed by what they found. A lot can happen in sixty years. The Jews who had been allowed to remain had to adapt. New forms of government. New forms of worship. Intermarriage to non-Jews. It was like going to a foreign land. How could they get things back on track?

Well, as we heard in our first reading, God, speaking through the prophet Isaiah, speaks words of encouragement to a disheartened and discouraged people:

“See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy.

And, at last, once more, the people of Israel had reason to harbor even the smallest glimmer of hope.

**I**nterestingly, this very same promise is repeated near the end of the last book in the Bible, in the Revelation to John.

The book of Revelation was a letter written to a group of congregations during the latter half of the first century. It was a time when Christians were being severely persecuted, and many were questioning their faith, while others were dying for their faith.

The letter offered words of encouragement: Even though your world seems to be falling apart, even though God seems nowhere in sight, nevertheless, God is *still* in control, he *will* win in the end, and his people *will* be vindicated.

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of Revelation, in a climatic passage, the letter's author penned these familiar words:

Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away... I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them... 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, *for the old order of things has passed away.*"

And it was with words like these that those persecuted Christians were given hope, and they pressed on.

Are there similar words of hope in the resurrection? Is there some sign that should encourage us to press on? If so, what is it? Let's go to John's gospel and see what we can find.

**I**n John's gospel, we don't find many miracles, as much as we find "signs." Those signs were usually amazing and miraculous events, employed by Jesus, as a way of confirming the claims that he made about himself.

There are nine signs in John's gospel. Seven took place before the death of Jesus, and two followed. The first seven signs were these: changing water into wine; healing an official's dying son from a distance; healing a man who had been sick for thirty-eight years; the feeding of the five thousand; Jesus walking on water; the healing of the man born blind; and the raising of Lazarus.

Seven signs. Seven. What should that number remind us of? I think John means it to suggest the seven days that are in a week. When you have seven days, you have a full week, which should suggest to us also a sense of completion, or that something has come full circle. But I also think John wanted us to associate that number seven with the seven days of creation, as recorded in Genesis 1.

Now, there's an eighth sign in John's gospel. In chapter 20, Jesus rises from the dead. *Now, that's a sign!* Question: Where does the resurrection take place? Where is the tomb located? In a garden. Where else, in the Bible, does a garden figure prominently? The garden in Eden. And we're back at the creation story.

Alright, if the first seven signs suggest not only a full week, and a sense of completion, but also the seven days of creation, what does an eighth sign suggest? An eighth day, certainly, but it's also the start of a *new* week.

When we consider all of the parallels between John's gospel and the creation story in Genesis, I think it becomes clear that what John is telling us, is that the resurrection of Jesus marked the first day of a new creation. The resurrection inaugurates the advent of the "new heavens and a new earth."

But here's the thing: this new creation won't be happening someplace else; it's going to happen right here, on *this* earth. John hasn't been trying to describe what "heaven" will look like for the faithful few, but rather what the *earth* will look like for *everyone*.

"The Holy City, the new Jerusalem," described in Revelation, isn't a place to which some of us will hopefully ascend; rather, it's coming to earth. It's coming to us. It's coming *for* us. And with it, "the old order of things" — life as ordered and determined by humans — will be replaced by the new order; a life ordered and determined by God. In other words, John is telling us this huge story about how God is going to rescue *all of creation!*

In his new book, "Love Wins," Rob Bell describes it like this:

The tomb is empty,  
a new day is here,  
a new creation is here,  
everything has changed,  
death has been conquered,

the old has gone,  
the new has come.

And that, my friends, should give us all reason for hope.

**N**ow, if you've been paying careful attention, you may be thinking, "Didn't he say there were nine signs in John's gospel? But he's only mentioned eight. What about the ninth?" If you were thinking that, good for you.

In the ninth sign, John has a special gift for each and every one of us, and it takes place very near the end of his gospel.

The disciples are back again fishing. They've been net-fishing all night and haven't caught anything. Suddenly, the resurrected Jesus appears on the shore, and he instructs them to throw out their nets on the other side of the boat. They do so and, immediately, their nets are filled with fish, almost to the point of breaking.

Two things are striking about this story. First, this is John's last scene of Jesus with the disciples, and yet it's almost an exact duplicate of Luke's first scene of Jesus with the disciples. Again, there's that sense of things coming full-circle, of things ending *and* beginning, and I think that's neat!

The second thing about this story is the fact that John records the number of fish caught: 153. Really? You mean someone counted? Probably not, but scholars seem to think that the number was meant to represent the entire world, all of creation.

So, what does all this have to do with us? Where is John's special gift for us?

Well, as the curtain comes down on John's gospel, we're left with an image of Jesus and the disciples working in concert, casting nets across the whole world, and ushering in the new order, the new creation.

And as we watch the curtain come down on John's gospel, we're reminded of another curtain that is being raised in the first chapter of the book of Genesis. And there we see a scene of God working in concert with Adam, naming the animals and ordering the new creation.

And again, we come full-circle. Isn't it wonderful?

Sometimes, this world seems like such a mess. Sometimes, there seems to be little reason for hope. But the resurrection of Jesus stands in stark contrast to all the newspaper headlines, and all of the top-of-the-hour news reports.

The resurrection of Jesus reminds us that God *is* with us, and that together we *can* bring about a new thing, and that, in the end, by the grace of God, hope *always* wins!

May God bless you with a restless discomfort about easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may seek truth boldly and love deeply.

May God bless you with a holy anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation, so that you may tirelessly work for justice, freedom, and peace for all people.

May God bless you with the gift of tears to shed with those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, or the loss of all that they cherish, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and transform their pain into joy.

And, finally,

May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you really *can* make a difference in this world, so that, with God's grace, you *are* able to do what others claim cannot be done.

Amen.