



The Easter Season

Celebrate new life in Christ

AMY EKEH

APRIL 1

Easter Sunday, The Resurrection of the Lord

John 20:1-9, Mark 16:1-7, or Luke 24:13-35

REFLECT: There are three possible Gospel readings for the celebration of Easter Day. Two of them are accounts of Jesus’ followers discovering that his tomb is empty, and one of them is an account of Jesus’ followers encountering the Risen Christ. We will focus on the reading from Mark’s Gospel, read at the Easter Vigil. It is one of the empty tomb narratives.

In Mark’s account, three women who have been following Jesus and who witnessed his crucifixion and burial (see Mark 15:40-41, 47) come to Jesus’ tomb in order to anoint his dead body. Mark tells us that they came early in the day, “when the sun had risen,” a subtle but sure hint at the brightness and glory of the Resurrection.

The women are preoccupied with a practical concern: “Who will roll back the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” Jesus had been buried in a grave “hewn out of rock,” and a large stone had been rolled in

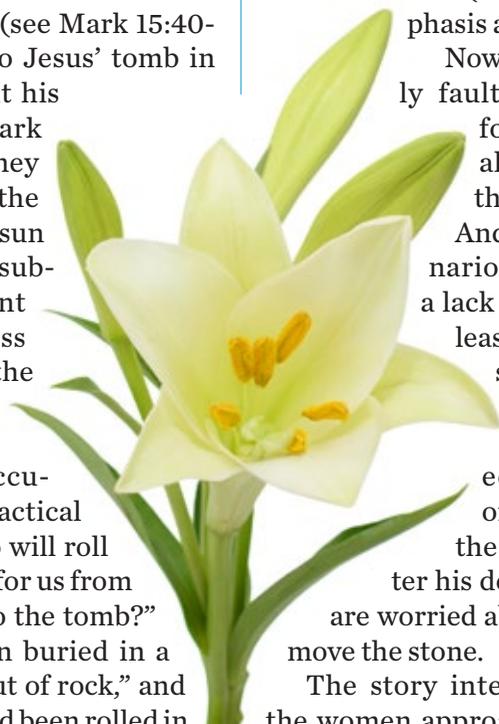
front of the entrance. Apparently the rock was so large that the women knew they would not be able to move it themselves.

The rock in front of Jesus’ tomb and the women’s preoccupation with it may seem like insignificant details, but note what we learn in this situation. Mark tells us that these women have been following Jesus since they were in Galilee. They have been with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They have heard Jesus teach. They have faith in him. But apparently found it hard to believe some of what Jesus taught: “The Son of Man is to be handed over to men and they will kill him, and *three days after his death he will rise*” (Mark 9:31, emphasis added).

Now, we can hardly fault the women for not actually expecting this to happen!

And yet this scenario does reveal a lack of faith, or at least a misunderstanding, on the part of these devoted followers of Jesus. It is the third day after his death, but they are worried about who will move the stone.

The story intensifies when the women approach the tomb



MONTH SUMMARY

APRIL 1

Easter Day

John 20:1-9, Mark 16:1-7 or Luke 24:13-35

Three women find Jesus’ tomb empty and are told that he is risen.

APRIL 8

Second Sunday of Easter (Divine Mercy Sunday)

John 20:19-31

Thomas places conditions on believing that Christ is risen.

APRIL 15

Third Sunday of Easter

Luke 24:35-48

The risen Jesus declares that he is not a ghost as he shows his disciples the wounds of his crucifixion.

APRIL 22

Fourth Sunday of Easter

John 10:11-18

Jesus declares that he is the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep.

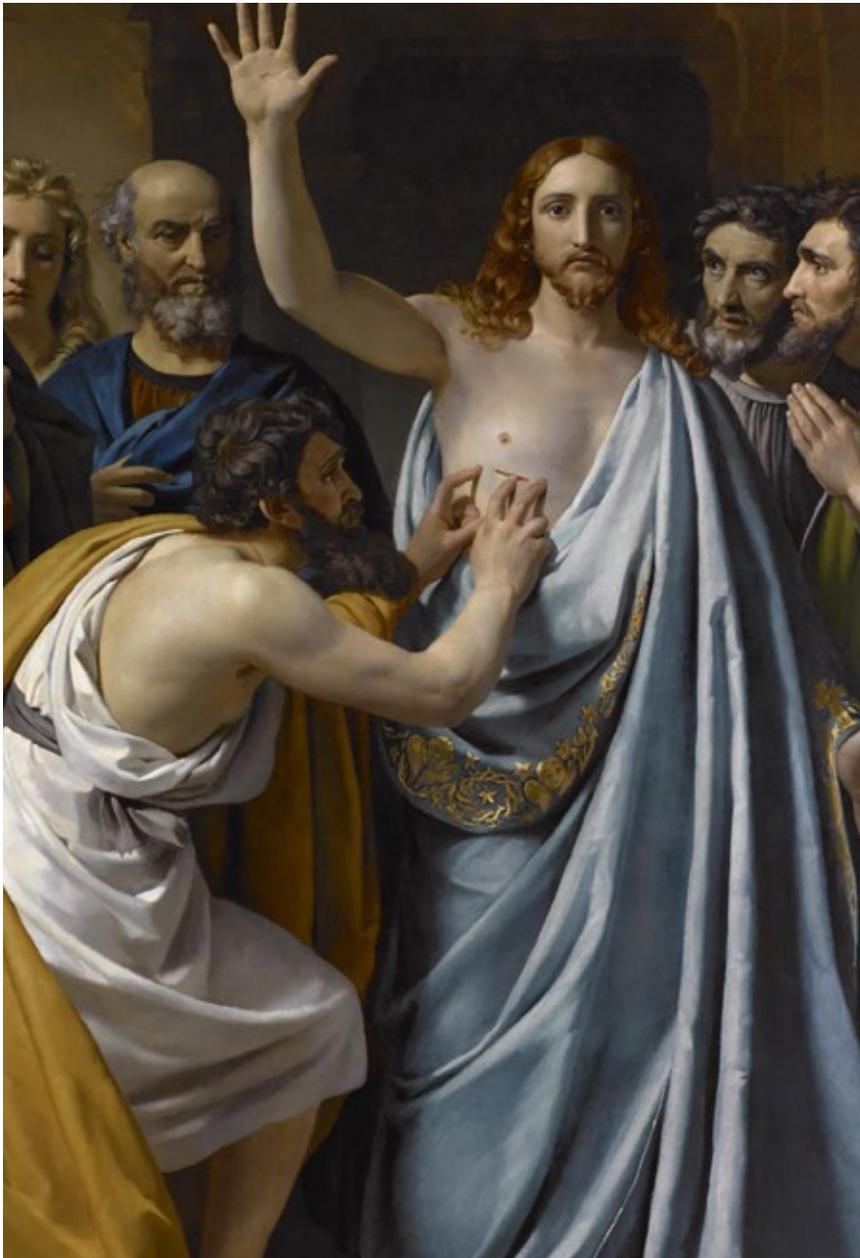
APRIL 29

Fifth Sunday of Easter

John 15:1-8

Jesus uses the analogy of vine and branches to describe his intimate relationship with his disciples.

and find that the “very large” stone has already been rolled back. The tomb itself was apparently quite large, because they all enter it and find a young man



THE INCREDULITY OF SAINT THOMAS, Francois-Joseph Navez, 1823

inside, clothed in white. This man declares that the crucified Jesus has been raised: “He has been raised; he is not here. Behold the place where they laid him.”

In this simple declaration we have the foundation of Christian faith: “He has been raised.” As they stand in that tomb, the women must decide whether they will believe based on the word of others. The message is mind-boggling. It requires extreme faith.

Would I have required proof, like Thomas? Do I require proof from God?

What will they believe? What will they do? All these many centuries later, we must ask ourselves the same questions. Will we believe the words proclaimed to us on this beautiful day? What will we do with this good news?

ASK YOURSELF: Who proclaims the Risen Christ to me in my life? Do I believe based on their word?

ASK YOUR STUDENTS: After the young man in the empty tomb declares to the women that Jesus has been raised, Mark’s Gospel tells us that “[the women] went out and fled from the tomb, seized with trembling and bewilderment” (16:8). Why do you think they had this reaction? How do you think you would have reacted?

PRAY: Risen Christ, fill me with the light and truth of your resurrection, that I may always expect to find your tomb empty and trust in those who declare you risen.

LIVE THE GOSPEL: How can your life be a proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus? How can you be an active witness to the reality of new life?

APRIL 8

Second Sunday of Easter
(Divine Mercy Sunday)

John 20:19-31

REFLECT: Every year on the Sunday after Easter (now known as Divine Mercy Sunday), we read the story of the disciple Thomas refusing to believe that Jesus has been raised from the dead until he can see and touch Jesus’ crucified and risen body. Although the story has led to St. Thomas receiving the unfortunate nickname “Doubting Thomas,” each of us knows that we may at times have been just as lacking in faith as Thomas, just as stubborn in our refusal to believe.

Thomas lays out three conditions that must be met before he

will believe that Jesus is risen:

- “see the mark of the nails in his hands”
- “put my finger into the nail marks”
- “put my hand into his side”

Unless these three conditions are met, Thomas firmly declares, “I will not believe.”

Of course, as we know, Jesus comes back to the group of disciples at a time when Thomas is present. Jesus meets every condition, urging Thomas to look at his hands, place his fingers in the nail marks, and put his hands into his side, which had been wounded with a soldier’s lance (John 19:34). Thomas responds with one of the most faith-filled declarations in all of Scripture: “My Lord and my God!”

This Gospel story sheds light on both Jesus’ mercy and his high expectations. On the one hand, Jesus comes to Thomas with every intention of satisfying his doubts and encouraging him to believe. But on the other hand, he says to Thomas, “Have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed.” Jesus understands Thomas’ difficulty in believing, and yet he deeply values those who believe without seeing.

Very few people had the advantage that Thomas had. Very

few could physically place their hand in the side of Christ, close to his heart. The rest of us must believe without seeing. We believe based on the faith of the community and the ongoing declaration that he is risen, that he lives. Blessed are we, when we too can declare to the risen Christ: “My Lord and my God!”

ASK YOURSELF: Would I have required proof, like Thomas? Where in my life do I require proof from God before I will believe?

ASK YOUR STUDENTS:

Is it hard for you to believe that Jesus is risen from the dead? Or do you feel confident in your faith? Why must we rely on the word of others? What are some other things that you believe based on the word of others?

PRAY: Risen Christ, you are my Lord and my God. I see the nail marks in your hands. I place my hand in your side, close to your heart. I believe.

LIVE THE GOSPEL: This week pray for those who struggle with doubt.

APRIL 15

Third Sunday of Easter

Luke 24:35-48

REFLECT: In today’s reading from Luke’s Gospel, the Risen Christ appears to a gathering of his disciples. In a fascinating exchange between Jesus and his followers, something becomes abundantly

*We call Jesus’
resurrected body his
“glorified body.”*

clear: *The Risen Christ had a physical body.* That body had been changed in some way, but it is *the same body that was crucified.*

In the Greek culture so influential at the time of Jesus, most people believed that the body and the soul were separate entities. They believed that the soul dwelt in the body until the body died, and then the soul escaped into immortality. But the Jewish understanding of the human person was quite different. The Jews believed that the body was essential to the person; it was not simply a “shell” or a “house” for the soul. This belief in the unity of the human person — *body and soul* — is reflected in today’s Gospel.

Luke tells us that when Jesus appeared in a room where the disciples had gathered, they were “startled and terrified and thought they were seeing a ghost.” But Jesus responds, “Look at my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me and see, because a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you can see I have.” Why did Jesus specifically tell his followers to look at his hands and feet? This is where they would find the wounds of his crucifixion, apparently still visible. Note that Jesus also clearly refers to “flesh and bones.”

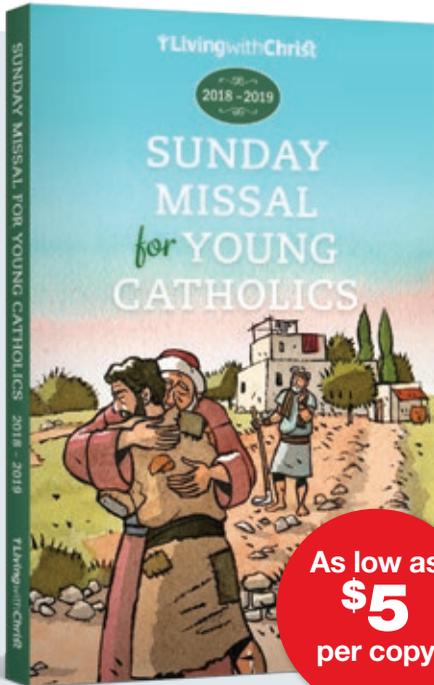
Jesus then asks his disciples if they have anything to eat. “They gave him a piece of baked fish; he took it and ate it in front of them.” What is the purpose of this detail? Ghosts do not eat real food. Real bodies eat real food.

It may come as a surprise to your students (and possibly



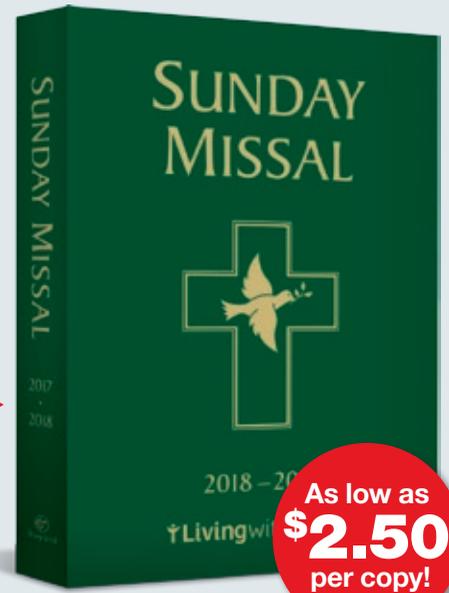
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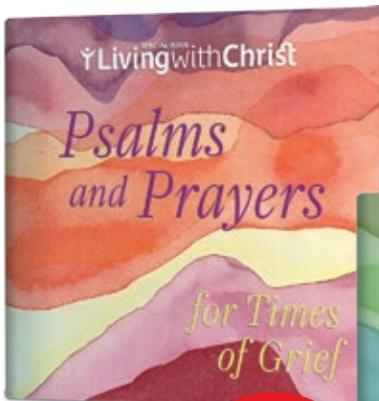


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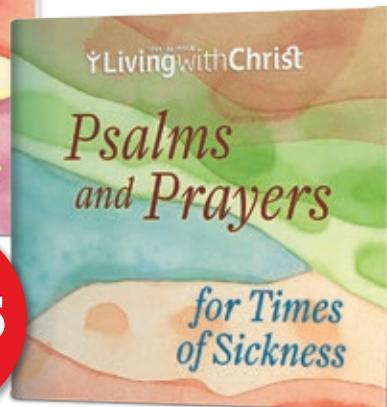
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their parents, and possibly you yourself!) that our faith includes a firm belief in the resurrection of the human body. If this is the case, you may find paragraphs 988-1004 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* to be a useful resource. (The full text of the *Catechism* is available and searchable online.)

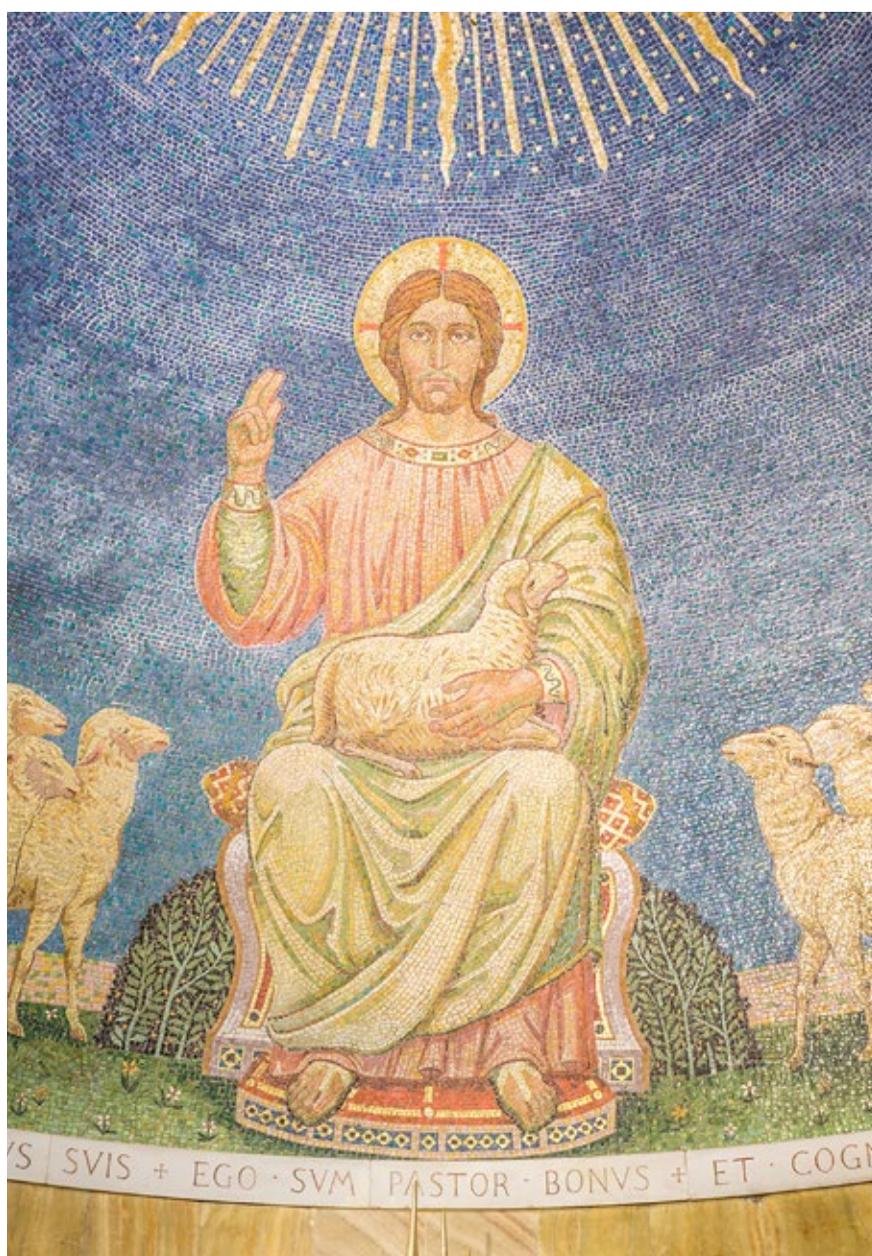
This is a difficult but fantastic teaching, and well worth our reflection during this Easter season. As St. Paul wrote, “If the

Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit who dwells in you” (Romans 8:11).

Ask yourself: How do I relate to my own body? Do I recognize it as an essential part of who I am, as part of who I will be forever?

ASK YOUR STUDENTS: The body

Detail of a mosaic of **JESUS CHRIST THE GOOD SHEPHERD** in Rome



of the Risen Christ was different in some ways from his earthly body. He was able to appear in locked rooms (see John 20:19), and his own followers did not always recognize him (see Luke 24:31). We call Jesus’ resurrected body his “glorified body.” St. Paul tells us that we will also have this type of body when we are raised from the dead. Read 1 Corinthians 15:42-44. What do you think this “glorified body” will be like?

PRAY: Risen Christ, you are not a ghost. You ate food. You could be touched. You had flesh and bones. Help me to believe in this awesome miracle.

LIVE THE GOSPEL:

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains, “In expectation of that day [the last day when all persons will be raised from the dead], the believer’s body and soul already participate in the dignity of belonging to Christ. This dignity entails the demand that he should treat with respect his own body, but also the body of every other person” (CCC, 1004). This week, be intentional in your care for your own body or the body of someone you take care of. Imagine how that body will someday be raised and glorified, just like the body of Christ.

APRIL 22

Fourth Sunday of Easter

John 10:11-18

REFLECT: On the Fourth Sunday of Easter (traditionally called “Good Shepherd Sunday”), our Gospel reading is always an excerpt from John 10. In this chapter of John’s Gospel, Jesus presents himself as a loving and

APRIL 29

5th Sunday of Easter

John 15:1-8

REFLECT: In this week's Gospel reading, Jesus speaks of the transforming power of being in relationship with him. As is typical of Jesus' teaching style, he uses an analogy from nature to explain:

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He takes away every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and every one that does he prunes so that it bears more fruit."

This simple analogy tells us several things. First, we are one with Christ. He is the vine, and we are branches that sprout from that vine. We are

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attentive shepherd who cares for his sheep.

In this touching passage, Jesus declares twice: "I am the good shepherd." The first time he declares this, he elaborates by saying, "A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." Jesus contrasts a good shepherd with a "hired man who is not a shepherd." A hired man will run away when he spots danger ("a wolf coming"). He does this to protect himself because he "has no concern for the sheep." But Jesus is not a hired man. He is a true shepherd. He is concerned for the sheep, and when danger comes he will not protect himself. In fact, he will sacrifice himself for the sake of the sheep.

The second time Jesus declares, "I am the good shepherd," he elaborates by saying, "I know mine and mine know me." He then compares this intimate relationship between shepherd and sheep with his own relationship with the Father: "just as the Father knows me and I know the Father." Familiarity with this passage must not allow us to overlook the depth of this statement. Imagine the intimacy, the unity, between Jesus and his Father. Now imagine sharing in that intimacy. This is what Jesus is telling us: we share in the loving, eternal relationship between Father and Son.

Our shepherd will stop at nothing to protect us, to lead

*Where do I hear the voice of my Shepherd?
Do I allow Jesus to shepherd and protect me?*

us, to know us. He willingly lays down his life for us, not because he is hired to do so, but because he loves us. This shepherd also desires unity among his flock. If we follow his voice, he tells us "there will be one flock, one shepherd." On this Good Shepherd Sunday, let us listen for his voice, so we may all follow the one who willingly lays down his life for his sheep.

ASK YOURSELF: Where do I hear the voice of my Shepherd? Do I allow Jesus to shepherd and protect me?

ASK YOUR STUDENTS: What do you think it was really like to be the shepherd of a flock of sheep? Why do you think Jesus used this analogy to explain his relationship with us?

PRAY: Jesus, Good Shepherd, you know me and I know you. Keep me close to you so I may always hear and know your voice.

LIVE THE GOSPEL: How can you imitate Jesus the Good Shepherd this week? Who can you care for or protect? How can you lay down your life in some way for another person?

completely attached to him. If we are not, we are spiritually dead. As Jesus says, “Without me you can do nothing.”

Second, the Father is at work in us. As the master gardener and vine grower, the Father tends to his vineyard by pruning the healthy branches that are attached to the vine of Christ. Although “pruning” can sound like a painful procedure, it is what maintains the vigor of the plant and encourages new growth and fruit.

Finally, we learn from this analogy that Jesus and the Father expect something from us. Attached to the vine of Christ and pruned by the Father, we should bear fruit. What is this fruit? It is something visible and tangible, something that comes forth from us and shows that we are one with Christ. In the Christian life, this fruit is love. It is the sign of discipleship. “By this is my Father glorified,” Jesus declares, “that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”

The Easter season is a time of new life and growth. As you see plants sprouting up and flowers blooming during this time of year, remember your own attachment to the vine of Christ. Remember that the Father is pruning you. Remember the purpose of this attachment and pruning is that you may bear fruit in the world, the fruit of his love.

ASK YOURSELF: How is the Father pruning me at this time in my spiritual journey? Do I allow him to do this?

ASK YOUR STUDENTS: Look at pictures of a grape vine and draw a vine. What do you notice about it? What are the different parts of the plant, and how do they work



How do you use The Sunday Gospel?

Catechists and DREs share that this department is used in the following ways:

- discussions with students to prepare for, or recap, what’s heard at Sunday Mass
- catechetical teams meeting to review and discuss together before starting their classes
- questions sent to parents for family discussions
- strengthening of personal knowledge of the Gospels

Tell us how you use The Sunday Gospel. Email Pat Gohn, Editor at *Catechist*, at pat.gohn@bayard-inc.com. Thank you!

together? Why might the plant need to be pruned? Think about your responses, and then reflect on why Jesus used the analogy of a vine and branches to explain his relationship with us.

PRAY: Jesus, you are the vine, and

I am one of your many branches. Sustain and strengthen me so I may bear the fruit of your love.

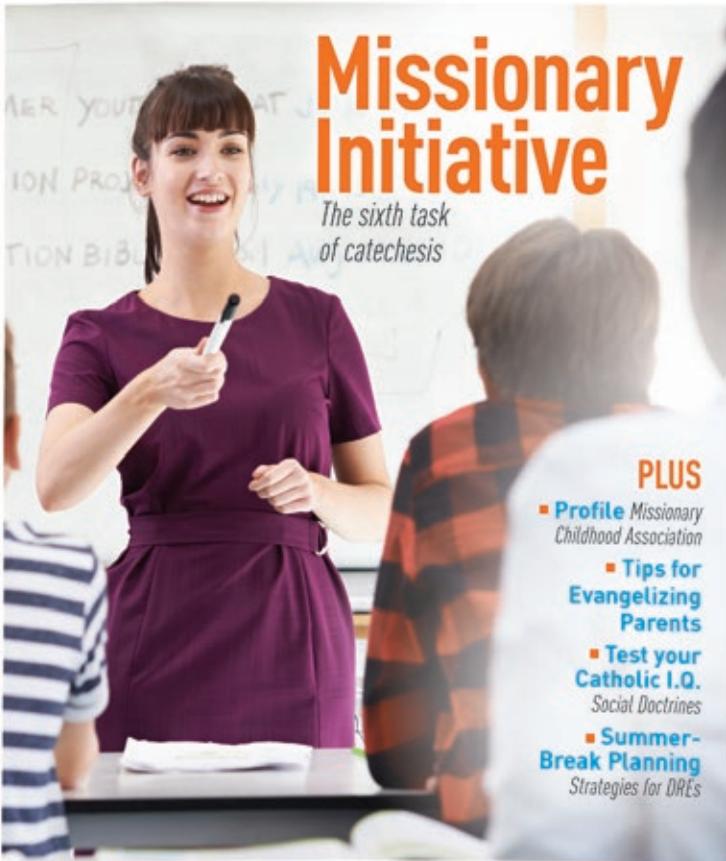
LIVE THE GOSPEL: How will you “bear fruit” this week? How will you be a sign of Jesus’ love in your family or community?

Catechist

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MAY 6

Sixth Sunday of Easter

John 15:9-17

REFLECT: This Sunday's Gospel reading takes up where last Sunday's reading left off. As we might expect, Jesus continues talking about how love and bearing fruit are essential to the life of a disciple. This teaching comes in the midst of Jesus' farewell address to his disciples in John's Gospel. He is giving them his final

MONTH SUMMARY

MAY 6

Sixth Sunday of Easter

John 15:9-17

Jesus calls his disciples "friends" and encourages them to love one another.

MAY 13

The Ascension of the Lord

Mark 16:15-20

Jesus instructs his disciples to "proclaim the gospel to every creature" and then ascends into heaven.

MAY 20

Pentecost Sunday

John 20:19-23 or

John 15:26-27; 16:12-15

Jesus breathes on his disciples and tells them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

MAY 27

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity

Matthew 28:16-20

The risen Jesus instructs his disciples to baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

instructions before he lays down his life.

It should not surprise us that the most urgent message on Jesus' mind before his death is a message about love. Jesus has lived this; he has shown them. Now he has very little time, and only these words and a final act of love (his death) remain to teach them this message once and for all — a message they will then be responsible for living and sharing with others.

"As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love." A central theme of Jesus' teaching about love is that the Father is the source of this love. The love between Jesus and his disciples, and the love among the disciples themselves, is a sharing in the love between Jesus and his Father. The depth of this love is eternal and incomprehensible.

"No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." The ultimate sign of love is the willingness to deny oneself for the sake of the other. Jesus urges his disciples to love in such a radical way that they are even willing to die for one another. Jesus is essentially saying to them, "You are my friends, and I will die for you. You are one another's friends, and you must be willing to do the same for one another."

Why is Jesus so adamant that the disciples receive and internalize this message before he departs? "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete." Jesus calls upon us to live a challenging way of life, but it is a way that he himself lived. It is a way that led to the Easter joy we still experience.

ASK YOURSELF: How do I live

Jesus' command to love one another? Who will I "lay down my life" for?

ASK YOUR STUDENTS: How do you think Jesus' disciples felt when they heard Jesus call them his friends? How might this have changed the way they thought of their relationship with Jesus?

PRAY: Lord Jesus, you have declared your love for me and called me "friend." Help me to be a friend to others, to love them as you have loved me.

LIVE THE GOSPEL: We cannot live the Gospel authentically unless we have experienced the love of Christ. This week, rest in that love. Read today's Gospel slowly and prayerfully. Choose one phrase or sentence and repeat it in your heart several times. Imagine Jesus saying these words to you. Remain in his love.

MAY 13

The Ascension of the Lord

Mark 16:15-20

REFLECT: The observance of the Ascension of the Lord, traditionally celebrated forty days after Easter on a Thursday, is moved to the following Sunday in most dioceses in the United States.

Although the Ascension itself is only narrated in Mark and Luke (and told again in the Acts of the Apostles), all three of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) include final instructions from the risen Christ to his disciples about going out into the world to proclaim the Good News:

"Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations." (Matthew 28:19)

“Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature.”
(Mark 16:15)

“Thus it is written that the Messiah would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance, for the forgiveness of sins, would be preached in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.”
(Luke 24:46-48)

It is clear that Jesus wanted his disciples to take the good news of salvation to people far and wide. What they had experienced in Jesus’ ministry, death, and resurrection was not an experience to keep to themselves or some small group of believers. “All nations” and “every creature” certainly indicate otherwise.

Final instructions carry great weight. These parting words have been chosen carefully. Are we listening? Will we do as Jesus asked?

ASK YOURSELF: How do I proclaim the Good News to all creatures? How is my catechetical

ministry a response to this final request of the risen Christ?

ASK YOUR STUDENTS: Why do you think Jesus instructed his disciples to “proclaim the good news to all creatures”? What do you think this means? How can you do this through words and/or actions?

PRAY: Lord Jesus, strengthen me to answer your call to share the good news of your life, death, and resurrection with all creatures.

LIVE THE GOSPEL: St. Francis is traditionally credited with the maxim: “Preach the gospel at all times. When necessary, use words.” This week, preach the good news of Jesus with your life. Show love to the unlovable; touch the untouchable; make a sacrifice for the sake of another.

MAY 20

Pentecost Sunday

*John 20:19-23 or John 15:26-27;
16:12-15*

REFLECT: Today we celebrate Pentecost, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the early Church, and its continued outpouring on our Church today.

The first Scripture reading from today’s lectionary is from Acts 2. This reading narrates the Pentecost event, when “a noise like a strong driving wind” and “tongues as of fire” create dramatic imagery and help us to imagine what that powerful Spirit must have been like as it fell upon Jesus’ earliest followers.

The appearance of the risen Christ that is narrated in today’s Gospel reading from John 20 has been called the “Johannine Pentecost.” In other words, it is a story from John’s Gospel of the Holy Spirit falling upon God’s people. In this story Jesus appears in a locked room with his disciples. He says, “Peace be with you,” and shows them his wounds. Then he *breathes on them* and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” (Interestingly, the word for *breath* in Greek — *pneuma* — can also mean “wind” or “spirit.”) Jesus then gives his disciples the authority to forgive sins.

In this beautiful scene from John’s Gospel, note the relationship between Jesus’ greeting of peace, his wounds, his breath, his Spirit, and his forgiveness. As is typical of John, a deep spirituality is at work here. Through the wounds of Jesus, we have peace; by his death, we are given his Spirit; by the very breath of Jesus, sins may be forgiven.

ASK YOURSELF: Do I have the peace of Jesus? (Ask God that his wind — his Spirit, his breath — may fall upon you and bring you peace.)

ASK YOUR STUDENTS: It might seem strange that the risen Jesus



breathed on his disciples! What do you think this imagery means? Why would Jesus do this?

PRAY: Risen Lord, grant me your Spirit of peace.

LIVE THE GOSPEL: Jesus greeted his disciples with the word *peace*. This week, do what you can to bring peace into this world — your country, your community, your parish, or your family.

MAY 27

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity

Matthew 28:16-20

REFLECT: On this Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity, our Gospel reading is taken from the last verses of Matthew’s Gospel. The risen Christ has gathered with his eleven disciples (the twelve minus Judas) on a mountain in Galilee in order to share with them some final words.

First Jesus makes a sweeping statement expressing his power as resurrected Lord: “All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” The Father (the only one who has this power to give) has given his Son — now firmly established as Lord and Messiah — authority and power over all things physical and spiritual, all things human and divine, all things of heaven and earth.

Jesus then instructs his disciples to “make disciples of all nations” and baptize them “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” This baptism reference is a clear example of a Trinitarian understanding of God in the New Testament and reflects an early



Christian use of this expression. Of course it remains a part of our Baptism rite (and our daily prayer) to this day.

Finally Jesus promises, “I am with you always, until the end of the age.” Here we have one of the many paradoxes of our faith: even when Jesus departs, he remains with us.

Note that all of these final teachings of Jesus require great faith — to believe in Jesus as Lord of all, to believe he is with us always, even though we cannot see him. It also requires great faith to assent to this Trinitarian understanding of God — both simple and complex — as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Perhaps the mystery and challenge of these truths are reflected in the reaction of the eleven to seeing the risen Christ on that mountain: “When they all saw him, they worshiped, but they doubted.” It is only natural that we — as contemporary disciples — might have the same response to the presence of God in our lives: worship *and* doubt. Trinitarian God, we believe! Help our unbelief!

ASK YOURSELF: In what area(s) is my faith challenged? Do I have doubts? (Be open and honest with God, and ask him to increase your understanding and faith.)

ASK YOUR STUDENTS: Reflect with your students on what it means to say that God is “Trinity” (one God, three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). Why do you think it is so important to understand God as Trinity? Ask students to share how they relate to God as Father, Son, and Spirit.

PRAY: Trinitarian God, increase my faith in you as a God of love who is always with me.

LIVE THE GOSPEL: This week, reflect on how you relate to God as Father, Son, and Spirit. Do you always pray to the Father or to Jesus? Make an effort to expand the way you conceive of God. Pray to God as Trinity, or ask the Spirit to work powerfully in your life.



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(Liturgical Press). Find more at AmyEkeh.com.