

Mothers' Day: Jesus Is Risen Today

- 4th Sunday of Easter
- May 11, 2014
- Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

Three weeks since Easter Sunday. Mothers' Day. Alumni Reunion Weekend.

I remember clearly a moment forty years ago when I was teaching an all-boys sophomore class of Latin at Gonzaga Prep. and happened to mention "My mother once told me..." There was this look of shock and surprise on the faces of the boys which was something like: "We didn't know Jesuits had mothers!" We do.

About 17 or 18 years ago I received a voice message from Jennifer Kelly, an alum of Seattle U. whose wedding to Jerry Scully I had witnessed. They had just given birth to their son, Tadhg, who will be going to Marquette next year. The voice message was, "Steve, I want you always to remember that no matter what you do or how important you become, you are always your mother's son." I think Jennifer, who was probably nursing Tadhg at that moment, thought I, in particular, needed that pearl of wisdom, that reminder for a bigshot Jesuit provincial and university president, "No matter what you do, you are always your mother's son." Not like: she once gave birth to you as your mother, or was your mother once upon a time when you were a child, but you are always your mother's son.

When we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, which we are doing in a special way in these weeks and do every Sunday of the year, we do not celebrate that Jesus once upon a time rose, or that he has risen, or even that he is still risen. Rather we celebrate that he is always rising, always the Risen One, always rising in us. As with our mothers, no matter what we do or where we go, or how important we become, Jesus of Nazareth is risen today in and for us. It is a present reality and relationship we celebrate, as fresh and surprising and difficult to take in for joy, as it was for women first and then the men on the first day. We all have mothers, even Jesuits, and we are all always our mothers' sons and daughters; and we are all always the adopted sisters and brothers in the Risen One, Jesus, who is risen today.

Today's gospel reflects on this or applies the resurrection to life through the habits of shepherds and sheep. Jesus had to use what was at hand and what people would understand. So the image is of a sheepfold or pen for sheep, but not just the sheep of one flock or of one shepherd, but a common pen or sheepfold for the sheep of many shepherds with a gatekeeper. A place where they would be kept safe in the night and from which a shepherd could retrieve his sheep and lead them out to pasture in the day. Jesus says he is the shepherd who enters through the gate; the gatekeeper opens it for him; the sheep scattered among all the rest in the pen hear their own shepherd's voice; the shepherd calls them by name; he leads them out; he walks ahead of them; they follow him because they recognize his voice. That's what Jesus had at hand to explain how as risen Christ dwelling in us he enters within us, knows us, calls us, leads us, and how we follow his call and go where he takes us. All present reality, not just what he did 2000 years ago.

He could have used a mother rather than a shepherd to explain this. The scene I would imagine would be one of those long-light nights in Juneau, Alaska, where I grew up. After dinner 25 neighborhood kids would fly out of their houses and join in a wild game of “kick-the-can” in the middle of some intersection. Then, after a couple of hours, here comes the shepherd. A mother would come to the door of a house, maybe a block away and unseen, and would call out, “Time to come in!” We, the five of our family, recognized her voice for sure, knew who was calling, no mistake about it, knew she was calling us not the other kids, and that we had better extricate ourselves from our pals and our game and come in to wash up, say our prayers, and go to bed. It is an image in some ways like the one of Jesus, of a shepherd calling his sheep from the common pen. I guess they didn’t play kick-the-can” in Jesus’ day!

The mystery—not the moral; the wonder—not the message; is that the Risen Jesus enters within us, knows us, calls us by name, leads us out in our lives, goes with us and ahead of us, and know his voice as different from all the other voices which call to us but which we are not his voice. If we at first don’t know his voice, he teaches us by calling our name, i.e. speaks to who we truly are, and we learn to know, love, and follow that voice of the Risen One.

I would like to emphasize that the Risen One continues to know and enter within and call by name and teach to recognize his voice even sons or daughters or students or alumni about whom we may worry because of how they have distanced themselves from the Church or are put off and confused by it, and are not, as we say in a rather strange phrase, “practicing Catholics”... as if it takes a lot of practice to get this thing down of being a Catholic! It probably does! The Risen One, Jesus of Nazareth risen today, the Jesus who in actuality continues to be appealing and attractive to our young adults, this shepherd, this mother, still enters, knows, calls, leads, guides. We should not underestimate or pen up the power of his rising.

A final story about how this personal calling of the Risen one will always be the reality for us no matter what happens to us or becomes of us, Jesus always rising in us, as Jennifer gently reminded me that no matter what I am always my mother’s son. (I’ve told this story before but it is worth hearing again.) When my mother was 99 and sometimes a bit confused about things, I used to visit and sit next to her in her wheelchair at my parents’ home in Magnolia on a Sunday afternoon. My Dad was always reading the Sunday paper across the room. One afternoon my Mom leaned over and in a stage whisper you could hear in Ballard, and pointing an arthritically crooked finger in my Dad’s direction, said, “Steve, Steve, I think I’m going to marry that guy over there!” I replied, “Mom, you don’t need to, you are already married to him.” She: “I am?!” Me: “Yes, Mom, you have been married to him for 67 years.” She: “Does my mother know?”... Me: “Yes, Mom, your mother knows.”

Jennifer was right, my Mom even at 99 was always her mother’s daughter, and the shepherd too is right, he is always rising, entering into us, knowing us, calling us by name, and we can know his voice and can follow him as he leads and guides us in life. “The Lord is risen today; rejoice and be glad.” And “Happy Mothers’ Day.”