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—Susan McGurgan, DMin
Director, Lay Pastoral Ministry Program
Assistant Professor of Pastoral Theology
The Athenaeum of Ohio/Mount St. Mary’s Seminary

EASTER FIRE

Fire Starters for the Easter Weekday Homily

Richard J. Sklba and Joseph J. Juknialis



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O God, who through your Son
bestowed upon the faithful the fire of your glory,
sanctify this new fire, we pray,
and grant that,
by these paschal celebrations,
we may be so inflamed with heavenly desires,
that with minds made pure
we may attain festivities of unending splendor.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

May the light of Christ rising in glory
dispel the darkness of our hearts and minds.

—The Blessing of the Easter Fire, *The Roman Missal*

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Introduction

Easter begins with the first flickering light of the Easter fire against the darkness of Holy Saturday night. Blessed, and carried reverently, that light is accompanied by the congregation's triple praise for "Christ the Light of the World." One by one the holy flame is shared among those gathered in the assembly of believers, ever vigilant for the first signs of new life. Still surrounded by the darkness of a sinful world, the solemn announcement of the Lord's history-changing resurrection is sung as the jubilant message of the *Exultet* illumines the church together with the wider world. The Lord has been raised. Death has been conquered. The Word made flesh has been set free. All of creation is made new by his eternal light and life-giving presence.

Ever since that history-changing resurrection, the Good News has been proclaimed from the housetops, announced in the gathered assemblies of his disciples, and whispered to the hearts of those who seek him. Indeed, "how can they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone to preach?" (Rom 10:14). Yet what is it that one does when he or she preaches? Over the course of two thousand years of Christian preaching the answer to that question has taken on many different forms. In one way or another it has usually echoed St. Paul's wisdom in his Second Letter to Timothy that "all scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (3:16).

Apologetics and the refutation of error found predominance during the time of the early church fathers and again during the Reformation. Doctrinal preaching in the form of catechetics and a focus upon correct and right moral living became the norms following Trent and into the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. More recently, liturgical preaching has taken on the nature of the homily that seeks to proclaim the works of God in our lives, pointing to the ways that God is present in the context of our relationships—i.e., in righteousness and spirituality.

That more recent shift in liturgical preaching came as a result of the Second Vatican Council's document on the reform and renewal of the liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. "The sermon, moreover, should draw its content mainly from scriptural and liturgical sources, for it is the proclamation of God's wonderful works in the history of salvation, which is the mystery of Christ ever made present and active within us" (35).

That understanding was further developed in this country by the foundational document on preaching published by the United States Bishops' Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry, *Fulfilled in Your Hearing* (1982), which noted that the "the purpose (of the homily) is not conversion from radical unbelief to belief. A homily presupposes faith. Nor does the homily concern itself with a systematic theological understanding of the faith. The liturgical gathering is not primarily an educational assembly." Moreover, the same document also states that "the response that is most general and appropriate 'at all times and in every place' is the response of praise and thanksgiving (Eucharist)."

In 2012 the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life, and Vocations published the document *Preaching the Mystery of Faith: The Sunday*

Homily. It once more emphasized that, “Every homily . . . must therefore be about the dying and rising of Jesus Christ and his sacrificial passage through suffering to new and eternal life for us. By means of that pattern, the People of God can understand their own lives properly and be able to see their own experience in the light of the Death and Resurrection of Jesus . . . reflecting on our personal and collective experience in the light of the Paschal Mystery.”

The same focus for contemporary liturgical preaching has been highlighted by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel, 2014) in which he points out that “in the homily, truth goes hand in hand with beauty and goodness. Far from dealing with abstract truths or cold syllogisms, it communicates the beauty of the images used by the Lord to encourage the practice of good. The memory of the faithful, like that of Mary, should overflow with the wondrous things done by God. Their hearts, growing in hope from the joyful and practical exercise of the love which they have received, will sense that each word of Scripture is a gift before it is a demand” (142).

Finally and most recently, the decree of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments has published *Homiletic Directory* (June 29, 2014). It succinctly articulates the homiletic wisdom that has unfolded since the Second Vatican Council.

All of these sources have brought us to understand that effective liturgical preaching proclaims the *kerygma*—that is, it names where and how the passion, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus continues to take place today among believers, in the church, and in society. In other words, the task of liturgical preaching is to name the actions of God, to point to what God is doing today, “to show how and where the mystery of our faith, focused upon that day’s Scripture readings, is occurring in our lives” (FIYH).

How to Use *Easter Fire*



The preacher will find offered here both biblical background and homiletic suggestions for the weekday’s scriptures of the seven weeks of the Easter season. The material for each day begins with “God’s Story Proclaimed,” offering exegetical material for the first reading of the day (from Luke’s Acts of the Apostles), the psalm and gospel acclamation, and the gospel reading for that day.

There are also on occasion literary and historical notes that provide further background and context for the texts chosen by the Lectionary for a particular day.



Interspersed among the biblical background are paragraphs indicated by an icon as Homiletic Spark. The sentence highlighted in bold denotes the core focus of a possible homiletic message, always noting what it is that God is continuing to do in our lives. Generally these paragraphs offer only generic examples, with the expectation that the homilist can uncover specific examples common to those in the gathered assembly.

Among the Homiletic Sparks here are paragraphs highlighted in gray with the heading “God’s Story Made Present.” These point to an activity of God in our lives as a focus for a possible homily. However, they also offer a specific, concrete instance of how and where it is that God continues to enfold his Word in the lives of believers today. These examples may come from the media, literature, society, or simply daily human living.

None of the Homiletic Sparks offered in this volume are offered as homilies in themselves, but rather with the hope that they might spark in the preacher a recognition of where similar occurrences are taking place in his or her world and community and the personal lives of those gathered.

Throughout this work the Homiletic Sparks that are offered are of two kinds. They may be metaphors of illustration or metaphors of participation. For example, in a homily a preacher may suggest that just as waves wash over the shoreline, smoothing rocks, cliffs, and crevices, so God washes over our lives eroding our sin and bringing us to the image of Jesus. That image is a *metaphor of illustration*, an image to compare how God may work in our lives. On

the other hand, the preacher may point out how God actually does work in our lives to make us holy through spouses who challenge one another, through parents who raise children into goodness, or through the forces of society that insist upon cooperation and goodness. Such moments are the very activity of God eroding our sinfulness and smoothing our rough images. Such an image is a *metaphor of participation*. Metaphors of illustration are activities that parallel or imitate the activity of God, but they are not direct actions of God upon our lives. Metaphors of participation, on the other hand, are actual examples of God's moving activity in our lives. Throughout this book you will find both types of metaphors. The latter is usually more forceful than the former simply because it is more concrete, although both can be effective.

Finally, as part of the process of preparation the preacher may consider asking some of the following questions as a means of naming concrete examples of God's movement in human life.

- How is God's Story my story? Our story?
- What is the good news found in this text? What is the challenge?
- Where have I seen this Good News enfleshed in the lives of parishioners?
- What new vision does this Scripture offer?
- What darkness does it dispel?
- Where does this text suggest healing might be taking place?
- What promise of God does it make known?
- What might it offer to those who live in fear?
- What specific difficulties or conflicts might this text help negotiate?
- How does it tell the story of the community?
- In what ways does this Scripture passage offer hope to individuals living faith? To your community? To those who feel lost?

Our hope is that these pages and the thoughts they offer may become sparks to the week-day homilies of busy pastors and preachers during the glorious fifty days of each year's Easter season. May the paschal mystery we celebrate continue to illumine our journey into the new life we now share because of the baptism we have received.

—Joseph J. Juknialis

—Richard J. Sklba



The Octave of Easter

Monday of the Octave of Easter

God's Story Proclaimed

Acts of the Apostles

This is the second volume of Luke's gospel. Initially written for an affluent and educated segment of first-century society, Jesus is presented as a prophetic figure like Elijah, a new yet ancient voice reforming society and summoning care for the poor. This "Part Two" brings that same message to the wider world of nations and describes the way in which the God of Pentecost used the apostle Peter and the newly converted Saul (Paul) to bring the Good News of Jesus to the larger world. The Gospel is proclaimed first to Jews and then to Gentiles, culminating in Paul's preaching in Rome, the first-century center of imperial power. Words of faith first spoken two thousand years ago have again become the treasure of contemporary Christianity, annually renewing people of every age in faith and charity. This global gospel may be seen as part of the New Evangelization to which we are called anew. The entire church is its messenger.

ACTS 2:14, 22-33

God raised this Jesus; of this we are all witnesses.

Raised Up by God



The primary proclamation of Easter is the triple announcement that Jesus has been (1) raised by God (vv. 24, 32) and personally released from the "throes of death" (v. 24), (2) exalted to the "right hand of God," and (3) made the occasion for the final pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon the entire cosmos (v. 33). This is the fundamental good news of the Gospel of Jesus the Christ. This is the essence of Christianity, the truly astonishing *kerygma* ("announcement") around which we shape our lives, our celebrations, and our world. This is also our faith: received, welcomed, and embraced. Acts was written by Luke to document the spread of that

faith throughout the known Western world of the first century AD. Today's first weekday Eastertide reading places the entire contemporary church once again among the curious crowd gathered to hear Peter's words amid the initial confusion of Pentecost. People felt somehow compelled to stop and see what was happening. Easter and Pentecost are thus liturgically telescoped into a unity more characteristic of John's gospel (cf. John 20:1-23). During this first week of Easter the entire church hears again the initial proclamation of the Gospel from the lips of Peter immediately after the history-shaking event of that first Pentecost.



Believers hear a different song sung. Being a believer can at times feel like being sidelined, as if one is out of step with the rest of what is going on around us. Slowly, however, if one is faithful, one begins to hear a different tune being sung and a different rhythm at the heart of life. It is the Spirit of the risen Christ that has found a home in us, then, a voice to which we have stopped to listen, a new person who has taken over our lives. It is God's Spirit that propels us to stop and care about someone's distress even when time is of the essence. It brings us to soup kitchens and bedsides, and it enables us to love even those who seem unlovable.

In "An Old Cracked Tune" poet Stanley Kunitz reflected upon the difficulties of his own life, something that led him to a different place. "I dance, for the joy of surviving, / on the edge of the road," is how he wrote it. He explained that for him life was a matter of "dancing on the edge of the road, not in the middle where the heavy traffic flows. Maybe one of the secrets of survival is to learn *where* to dance."¹ Surely persons of faith have learned *where* it is that they choose to dance, at times becoming a place that differs from many others.

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Wondrously Mining the Psalms



In this speech, Luke describes Peter quoting Psalm 16, the song of David about a mysterious figure whom God would not

abandon to the abode of the dead nor allow to experience corruption (v. 10). Repeatedly Acts describes the early apostolic speeches as rooted in the Scriptures of Israel, and it interprets the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in their light. In Psalm 16, the Hebrew word for the “nether world,” namely, *Sheol* (v. 27), is made in the Hebrew text a parallel to *shahath* (“pit”), which the Greek text, however, has curiously chosen to translate as a place of decay and corruption. A comparison between the English translation of the psalm response (v. 10 in the Hebrew Psalter) and the reading from Acts (v. 27) illustrates the development. Thus we can see how the Greek translation of the Psalms was used at times by the early apostolic preachers to clarify their understanding of the destiny of Jesus and to describe his mission of salvation. For a Greek-speaking world, they used the Greek Scriptures.

Catechetical note: Just as the Scriptures deepened their understanding from earlier to later books, we continue that process when we understand our own lives better as a result of those inspired writings and the insights of our Christian faith. This is especially helpful when more difficult things come along in life or when we can view them in retrospect. We Christians have received the benefit of these deepened insights. When any psalm is applied to Jesus, it also offers an interpretation of our own lives as baptized followers of the risen Lord.



God’s promise is life. Rivers and lakes are renewed. Cities gentrify. The earth reboots in springtime. Bodies mend. Relationships heal and are rebuilt. Hope is discovered anew. There is something at the heart of all that is that will

not lie still in death. The believer recognizes it as the action of a life-giving God.

We Are All Witnesses



Earlier the text of Acts described the process by which Matthias had been chosen by lot to take the place of the ill-fated Judas and restore the apostolic “college” to the symbolic number of twelve (1:15-26). By definition they had been chosen as apostles because they each had witnessed the primary events of salvation. Peter proudly accepted the title of *martus* (“witness”) to the fact that God had raised Jesus from death (v. 32). All subsequent generations of Christians are likewise expected to be witnesses (*marturēs*), that is, to give ample demonstration of the effects of the Lord’s resurrection in their own lives as a result of the grace of their baptism. The Greek word for witness, “martyr,” quickly came to describe someone who gave witness by a faith-filled death. This also reflected and shared the Lord’s entrance into the paschal mystery.

Note to the Preacher

By ordination and the canonical faculty to preach, even contemporary twenty-first-century preachers can be said to be the church’s officially designated witnesses to the Lord’s resurrection! Moreover, if we claim membership in a church that is truly apostolic, even as it is “one and catholic,” all who preach the Gospel are also expected to offer their own apostolic witness to the risen Lord at work in our world.

God’s Story Made Present



God stirs us to give witness. Each of us in the circumstances of our own lives finds ourselves attesting to the faith in which we stand.

Fr. Lawrence Jenko was the Catholic priest held hostage in Beirut along with journalist Terry Anderson and multiple other Americans in 1985. Sometime later, well after his return to this country, he told

the story of coming to his mother's bedside just before she died. When he walked into the hospital room around noontime, her first weak words to him—and her last as it turned out—were “Did you have lunch yet?” Shortly thereafter she died. Later on, Fr. Jenko reflected upon that moment with a bit of wistfulness, wishing that his mother's final words might have been more reflective or faith-filled or in some way more memorable. “Did you have lunch yet?” seemed much too unimpressive for the banner one carries in the procession through death's archway. Yet the more he thought about it, the more appropriate those words seemed for that had been the way his mother had lived—always attentive to someone else's needs. It had always been the lens through which she looked upon life, the Spirit of Jesus that gave life to her days.

ANTIPHON—PSALM 16:1

Keep me safe, O God; you are my hope. (or: Alleluia)

Psalm 16:1-2a, 5, 7-8, 9-10, 11



Commentators vary in their suggestions regarding the original purpose of this psalm. Some see its expression of trust as a fitting prayer uttered by the people of Judah upon return from exile in Babylon in the sixth century BC to face the daunting task of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. Others prefer a time four hundred years later when God's faithful people courageously practiced their faith amid the threat of harsh Hellenistic punishments, even death. Taken as a whole, the psalm has also been viewed at times as a prayer of conversion that rejects false gods and reaffirms devotion to YHWH alone. The psalm's three themes of enduring trust (v. 1), return home (v. 6), and restoration to life (v. 10) also made the psalm a suitable prayer for the lips of the risen Jesus, Jewish to the core. In today's Eucharist the risen Jesus again expresses total permanent trust in his heavenly Father. Jesus returns home to his Father's home forever.

The Refrain

As noted above, the liturgy uses the first verse of the psalm as a prayer placed on the lips of Jesus. Here in the Easter liturgy as a communal response, the same verse becomes the prayer for all the baptized who have been granted a share in Christ's redemptive forgiveness and in the promise of eternal life in Christ. Preservation from full and final corruption (v. 10) becomes the hope of the entire assembly as a result of our baptism. Christ's prayer is now our prayer when faced by trial or hardship because of the Easter mysteries in which we have shared. Our hardships, large and small, are sacramentally linked to the Lord's paschal mystery.

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION—PSALM 118:24

Throughout this entire first week of Eastertide, the same alleluia verse from Psalm 118 is offered as an alternative to the solemn sung alleluia. It is as if the “day” of Easter (v. 24) is prolonged in time and extended for an initial octave of utter jubilation. It may also be helpful to note that the same Hebrew verb, *asah*, like its Latin equivalent *facere*, can mean both to “make” and to “act” or “do.” Although God may have “made” or “created” the day of Easter, it seems much more faithful to the Easter event to acclaim this day as the one in which God has definitively intervened by means of the resurrection of Jesus! Indeed, “this is the day in which the Lord has acted decisively!”

At an even more profound level, it may be helpful to recall that the sacred name of YHWH is a verb, usually translated simply as LORD. Conjectural though its original form and meaning may be (because at the time of Jesus it was never spoken except by the high priest once a year), the word could probably be translated as “He who will be what he will be” or “He who will make happen what will happen” (Exod 3:13-15). Thus the very name of God signals the

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One who freely and diversely intervenes for the world's salvation.

Lectionary note: Curiously, the gospel for Easter Sunday (John 20:1-10) does not include any

account of meeting the risen Lord Himself. Each day during this first week of Easter, however, the Lectionary chooses a different gospel reading from the various scriptural accounts of the early church's experience of Jesus newly risen. In that way, the modern assembly at prayer is exposed again each year to all the various reports of the church's first experiences of the risen Lord. Thereafter during the remaining fifty days of Easter, the Lectionary continues its presentation of passages from Acts as a first reading but then concentrates almost exclusively on John for the day's gospel text.

The Gospel of Matthew. This gospel is patterned after the Pentateuch with five discourses of Jesus interspersed by five accounts of the messianic healing actions by Jesus for the poor and ailing. It addresses a community comprised of early Torah-observant Jewish converts as well as Gentiles, concluding with the command of Jesus to bring the Gospel to all nations (28:18) and to baptize them into the very life of the Trinity! Jews and Gentiles are bound together by God's will forever.

MATTHEW 28:8-15

Go tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.

Lectionary note: This gospel's final chapter is divided into three parts. The first begins with an initial description of a terrifying meeting of the two women with an angel at the open empty tomb (vv. 1-6) and his command that they should convey to the apostles the risen Lord's invitation to meet in Galilee (v. 7). In Matthew's gospel today's passage (vv. 8-15) is then immediately followed by the final meeting of the Eleven with Jesus in Galilee and his great farewell commission of instruc-

tion and baptism for the whole world (vv. 16-20). This solemn conclusion reinforces Matthew's concern for the eventual definitive cooperation and united witness of Jews and Gentiles in God's kingdom.

True and False Witnesses



Historians tell us that it was an early Jewish custom to visit a tomb for three days, perhaps to make sure that the speedy burial required in pre-embalment ages did not accidentally inter someone still living. The theme of personal witness is clearly a primary concern for this first day's liturgy after the feast of Easter. The church's Lectionary first presents two Marys, the Magdalene and another Mary (the same individuals who had stood beneath the cross, cf. 27:56), who joyfully encounter the risen Lord (v. 9) and are deputed "apostles to the apostles" with his promise that the Eleven would also meet the risen Jesus, but in Galilee. His first words to the women were "Do not be afraid" (v. 10), repeating the very same admonition as had been given earlier by the angel at the tomb (v. 5). This expression echoes the angel's announcement to Mary (Luke 1:30), as well as the constant encouragement given to all the early faith-filled witnesses, especially those who faced opposition and skepticism. In the next portion of the chapter (vv. 16-28), the apostles will be gathered in Galilee and introduced to their eventual mission—namely, that of sharing the good news with the larger world. The practice of Israel was to require two men as a joint credible witness team to support each other's truthfulness. From the beginning the gospels, however, also include women among potential witnesses to the resurrection. Their witness included the experience of the empty tomb as well as the report of their meeting with the risen Jesus. From the earliest days our Christian faith has highlighted the unique way in which God constantly uses fearless women as heralds of hope for God's new world, even in our own time. Who are the fearless women of today that speak to your own faith?

By way of contrast, subtly emphasizing the women's positive witness, Matthew's gospel deftly reverts to the tale of the guards of the tomb (v. 11) who were bribed to claim the theft of the body of Jesus during the night. To make such an assertion as having happened while they were asleep, however, and therefore unable to witness anything, renders their testimony ludicrously empty and incredulous. They were protected by temple authorities (v. 12) even though they had shirked their responsibilities. They offered false witness to nonevents. They received money for lying (v. 15). The contrasting scenes are stark and striking. By ignorance, indifference, or downright sinfulness we also can give false nonwitness about the work of God in our world today.

God's Story Made Present



Faith gives new eyes for seeing. Each of us discerns that call to faith, or we do not. It is much like the contrast

between the two Marys, on the one hand, and the guards, on the other.

If God is not always so obvious, then how does one know if one's experience is of God or not? The psychologist William James suggests four marks: (1) the experience is more like a feeling than it is of the intellect (ineffability); (2) while not of the intellect, it is a font of knowledge akin to insight or awareness or some sort of illumination (noetic quality); (3) it is fleeting, usually lasting no more than seconds or a minute at most (transiency); and (4) one feels swept up and held by a superior power (passivity).²

Others have suggested additional markers: a sense of oneness with all that is, for instance, or that it serves as a springboard to service in the larger community. Like the story of Mary Magdalen, it is confusing at first and it takes time to discern.

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1. Stanley Kunitz, *The Collected Poems* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), 141; Bill Moyers, *The Language of Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 243–44.

2. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Modern Library, 1929), 371–72.