

## Homily for the Fifth Sunday of Easter, 2016

*(Year C: Rev. 21:1-5a)*

I've been speaking all this Easter season about the passages we hear from the most-misunderstood book of the Bible, Revelation. Remember that John writes to encourage his first-century Christian congregations to hold firm in the face of Roman persecution by telling a story of what history looks like if you view it from God's viewpoint. The heart of the story is that, whatever happens in the meantime, God finally sorts it out and makes things right. In today's passage, as we approach the climax of the Book, John tells us in symbols drawn from the Old Testament how things will finally end: God will "wipe every tear from their eyes; there will be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain" – for the old order, the world as we've known it, will pass away; and the new world, where all goes according to God's will, will sweep all the faithful up into unending joy.

John may well have had a Psalm in mind as he wrote, a memory of his Jewish heritage – it's a song about his people's liberation from captivity in Babylon, Psalm 126: Here are the first few lines:

*When the Lord brought back Zion's captives  
we lived in a dream.*

*Then our mouths filled with laughter,  
and our lips with song.*

*Then the nations kept saying, "What great deeds  
the Lord has done for them!"*

*Yes, the Lord did great deeds for us,  
and we were overjoyed.*

John knew that his people could survive if they could hold onto one thing: hope. And they could learn to hope by hearing his story, and by telling some of their own.

Here's a story from last week's news:

*Dateline ROME (CNS) — After less than 48 hours in Rome, "dream" is the word used most often by the six Syrian adults Pope Francis brought back to Italy with him from a refugee camp in Greece.*

*By April 18, the couples — who asked to be identified by only their first names, Hasan and Nour, Ramy and Suhila, Osama and Wafa — and their six children had spent more than three hours doing paperwork with Italian immigration officials and had enrolled in Italian language classes.*

*Other than that, most of their first two days in Rome were spent giving interviews and answering phone calls from friends and relatives who saw them on television boarding the pope's plane April 16. All three families saw their homes bombarded in Syria and all three arrived in Greece from Turkey on overloaded rubber boats months ago.*

Another story:

Some years ago when I was a university chaplain I had some contact with monks from the ecumenical monastery at Taizé in France. Founded just as World War II was breaking out, the

monastery now draws over 100,000 young people to it as pilgrims every summer. For as long as they stay the pilgrims gather each day in small groups, each with a leader who asks one question to start discussion: "What gives you hope?" The ability to hear other people's stories about hope and to tell their own is what draws people every summer: The monks know what the Psalmist knew, and what Saint John knew: that people live and die by hope.

You may have seen news of the study published this week by the National Center for Disease Control that showed that suicide rates in the U.S. are rising dramatically in almost every age group; maybe we need to ask that question of ourselves and one another in our society right now. What gives us hope?

Another story: When I was doing part of my training at what was then Pilgrim State Hospital we used to meet with the chief psychiatrist on the unit for rounds. One day he broke off from the day-to-day sad stories of dementia and psychosis, leaned forward in his chair, and made a pronouncement. He said, "Remember, gentlemen, mental illness saves lives!" He wanted to impress on us that sometimes people live in pain that gets overwhelming; and if the choice is taking leave from reality or taking leave from living, well, "mental illness saves lives." Without hope, the choice may be to go crazy, or to end it all.

John knew that his people could only live by hope – because their current situation was just awful. And his job as community leader was to connect them with sources of hope: the stories they knew from the Bible, and the stories they could tell about moments of hope they had experienced themselves. Why else does the Holy City arrive in John's story "beautiful as a bride adorned for her husband"? No doubt many of them remembered that day in their own families....

John's story in Revelation was designed to face its hearers with a choice: do we, even in this broken world, look for signs of hope and cherish them? Or do we turn sour and give up? Do we trust that God has shown his hand just enough – in stories like the Exodus and the Return from Exile, like the Resurrection of Jesus and like the everyday miracles of ordinary living – that we can afford to hope?

Back to the story of the refugees:

*Asked if his gesture was not really so small as to be insignificant, Pope Francis told reporters flying to Rome with him and the refugees that people used to tell Blessed Teresa of Kolkata that what she was doing was meaningless when there was an ocean of need in the world.*

*"And she responded, 'It's a drop in the ocean, but after this drop, the ocean won't be the same,'" the pope said.*

It will be quiet during the preparation of the gifts at Mass, as we do every Sunday; how about asking yourself the Taizé question: What gives you hope? Do you dare live by that?