Msgr. Dennis Sheehan
Homily Given on May 3, 2009
Fourth Sunday of Easter
Liturgical Year B

So…how long should a homily be? How long is too long? You might right now be thinking: *Get on with it*. A wise older priest once gave me three rules for good homilies: "Dennis," he said, "Stand up, speak up, and shut up."

A summer chapel by the seashore had this framed advice in the sacristy where priest vested for Mass: "Dear homilist – The Gettysburg Address easily fit on one page. Jesus' story of the Prodigal Son is only a few paragraphs long. If Abraham Lincoln or Jesus Christ can say so much in a short time, so can you. For God's sake – and ours – keep it short!"

After forty-five years of preaching, I have discovered that ending a homily is the hardest part. One priest described his bishop's preaching as watching a helicopter look for a landing pad. The man circled and hovered but rarely landed. A parishioner once described listening to his pastor as watching a dryer full of clothes. It went round and round and, once in a while, you got a dry sock, but mostly the homily just went in circles.

Ending a homily well is definitely the hardest part. Jesus' sheep will hear and recognize his voice. Jesus gives short, pithy stories full of truth and inspiration. True enough. But Jesus' stories much of the time don't have an ending. Take the Prodigal Son in Luke's gospel. He comes home, and the father throws a party. Did he stay? Did he hit the road again? Did he and his older brother reconcile? We don't know. The story never ends. The same with the Good Samaritan. Did he get well, that man along the road? Jesus just ends abruptly.

I think I know what Jesus is doing. Maybe the stories don't have an end because <u>we</u> are the ending. The test of good preaching is not ending well but touching your life – your mind, your heart.

I'll end here. But Jesus won't. He'll keep on speaking to you. Since you're one of his flock, you'll hear his voice long after you've heard mine. Homilies – good ones – don't really end. You provide the ending.