

## WHAT DOES EASTER MEAN?

Today we celebrate the Feast of Easter. What is the meaning of Easter? God has been in a relationship of love with humanity from the beginning of time. The story of creation in the Book of Genesis says that shortly after creation humanity decided to not listen to God but instead to do their will rather than the will of God. The Book of Genesis shows that as time passed sin increased in the world. God's response to the growing sin in the world was to form a covenant with His people. God formed covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses and David. Each of these covenants were ways of God inviting His people to live a life of faithfulness. The Old Testament shows that while God was faithful His people were not.

In the fullness of time God established the final covenant with His people through Jesus Christ. At the beginning of the Easter Vigil Mass a glorious song, the Exultet, is sung concerning the salvation brought about by the death and resurrection of Christ. The Exultet states, "O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam, which gained for us so great a Redeemer!" Easter celebrates Christ as the victim who died in order to bring us eternal life. The innocence lost by Adam is restored by Christ. Easter celebrates the final act of God's love when God brought man back to God. The rest of history will be a drawing close to the final transformation of the world and humanity's union with God.

## EXPERIENCE IN JERUSALEM

The parish's recent trip to the Holy Land allowed me to reflect on the meaning of the resurrection at the tomb of Christ. During our pilgrimage we had planned to visit the Church of the Sepulcher. I knew that during the visit I would be able to celebrate Mass in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. From the time I woke up in the morning I tried to decide what I would preach when we arrived at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Early in the morning we got on our bus and drove to Jerusalem. We began the morning with a stop at the Mount of Olives. We next drove to the Garden of Gethsemane. Next we drove to the place where Jesus was condemned to die. From this point we began the Via Dolorosa, the Way of the Cross. At each station we prayed about the events that happened in Jesus' life as he approached his crucifixion. As I made this journey my mind was fixed on what I would say in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. I had decided that my homily would focus on the cross of Jesus. I decided to speak about what it means to take up one's cross and follow Jesus.

By the time we arrived at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher it was almost time to begin. Our group lined up outside of the cave where Jesus was buried. I was able to enter the cave and spend a few minutes in silent prayer. From the cave we rushed to the chapel where we were to celebrate Mass.

In the sacristy I quickly vested and was given a binder with the prayers for the Mass. To my surprise the Mass that was given me were the prayers for the Mass of the Resurrection. In the middle of Lent I was being asked to say the Mass of the Resurrection. I could see that the homily that I had prepared didn't fit the Mass I was about to celebrate. I had about two minutes before I was to begin Mass. I thought to myself, "Where do I encounter the resurrection?" An answer came immediately. I encounter the resurrection in my church community. Right here at Good Shepherd Parish is where I most completely encounter the risen Christ. The tomb of Christ was not where the women and the disciples witnessed the resurrection but instead where Christ was not present. Even today, as was true 2,000 years ago, it is in the lives of faithful disciples that the resurrection and the risen Christ are most present. We encounter the resurrection when we study the word of God in Bible Studies and in our homes. We encounter the risen Christ when we reach out to the poor and encounter Christ in the least among us. We encounter the risen Christ in the sacraments and especially in the liturgy. We encounter Christ in our communal and individual prayer. My homily focused both on the cross and the resurrection.

While the risen Christ is present in the study of the Word of God, in outreach to those who are most vulnerable, in Eucharist and the other sacraments and in our communal and individual prayer life, the resurrection is not limited to the ways that we encounter Christ in our lives.

#### RAHNER EASTER AS THE BEGINNING OF GLORY

To discuss the meaning of Easter I would like to first turn to the writings of a Christian theologian named Karl Rahner. Rahner offers a provocative image for the resurrection. Rahner writes that the resurrection is like the process of lighting a stick of dynamite. Rahner writes that once the wick of a stick of dynamite has been lit the lighting of the dynamite is no longer a past event but instead a present event. As the wick burns this represents a present event which moves toward the explosion of the dynamite. In a like way the resurrection began with the rising of Christ to new life and yet the resurrection continues to be a present event. For Rahner the resurrection has begun the transformation of the world and our lives. We do not know how long it will take before the final consummation of the world takes place but we know that the end is coming. The victory has been won. The world moves toward final salvation. God is the goal of all salvation and this salvation is at hand. Rahner thus stated, "For the end has already begun and it is glory." As a result of the resurrection of Christ we are now encompassed by eternal glory. Christ's presence and grace is with us at all times.

### **Romans: Dead to Sin/Alive to God in Christ**

The second reading of the Easter Vigil is from the Letter of St. Paul to the Romans. The risen Christ personally constitutes a sphere of influence or milieu of salvation into which we are drawn into through baptism and faith. Christ contains within himself the messianic community destined for salvation. Through baptism we become part of the career of Christ: his death, burial and risen life. We die to sin and live a new life in Christ.

Sin for Paul was a power which tyrannized the human race. Through his death Jesus defeated sin and death. Through baptism we have escaped from the tyranny of sin. In Paul's view Jesus died to sin. Not that Jesus sinned but instead that he took our sins to the cross. Just as Jesus died to sin so we are to die to sin through baptism. Dying to sin through baptism means not only that Christ has defeated the power of sin but that we are to not live in sin.

Burial stresses the finality of death and being cut off from the preceding existence that death implies.

Paul says the Romans should now walk in newness of life. **Walking refers to behavior in the sight of God. "Newness" points to the new creation.** Paul is calling the Romans to live the righteousness of the upcoming new age. For Paul, since we hope to one day share the fullness of the resurrection we should be motivated to now live in right relationship with God. We are to let Christ live out his continuing obedience to the Father in us.

### **GOSPEL OF MARK**

The resurrection account that we have just heard proclaimed is taken from the Gospel of Mark. The last verse in the reading wasn't included in today's reading. The final verse states, "AND THEY WENT OUT AND FLED FROM THE TOMB, FOR TREMBLING AND BEWILDERMENT TOOK HOLD OF THEM. And they said nothing to anyone. For they were afraid (Mark 15:8)." It is easier to hear this reading without this verse. It is easy to see why the church left this verse out of the Easter reading. The women who hear the angel's message are told to go to the disciples and to tell them to go to Galilee. In Galilee they will see the Lord Jesus. Instead of going to the disciples it says that the women flee from the tomb in fear and that they say nothing to anyone.

Instead of ending with resurrection appearances the Gospel of Mark ends with the sentence, "For they were afraid (Mark 15:8)." The Gospel of Mark ends as a cliffhanger. The failure to relate resurrection accounts keeps "you will see him" a constant possibility for the disciples and for us.

At the end of the Gospel we are left staring into the open tomb. The Gospel leaves us with a challenge. The women flee and fear and say nothing to anyone. What will our response be to our encounter with the risen Christ? We have encountered the presence of the risen Christ and the truth of the Good News. Do we silently go on with our lives as if nothing happened or do we bring the Good News of salvation to others? What is our response to our encounter with the risen Lord?

#### SACRAMENTS OF INITIATION

Central to the meaning of the Easter Season are the sacraments of Initiation. At the Easter Vigil five individuals were baptized. Thirteen others were fully initiated through receiving the sacraments of Confirmation and First Eucharist. We encounter the risen Lord in these sacraments. In baptism we are bonded to God, we receive the Holy Spirit in the Sacrament of Confirmation and are renewed through the bread and cup of the Eucharist. The conversion which began in baptism is deepened through receiving the daily bread of the Eucharist. We dine with others in order to preserve human and social life. **We dine at the Eucharist to be sustained in the divine life of God begun at baptism and culminating at the Supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:4).**

#### OPENNING UP OUR LIVES TO THE RESURRECTION

To end my homily I would like to return to the writings of Karl Rahner. In one of his articles Rahner states that Easter puts us to the test, **“As Nietzsche said, people should be able to see us as those who are redeemed.”** Do people see us as people who have been redeemed?

Rahner leaves us with one last image which I feel is significant. Rahner questions whether in faith we allow Christ to open the tombs of our hearts so that Christ can dwell within our lives. This image speaks to the difficulty of truly letting Christ break through our unbelief in the resurrection. Rahner ends the article Easter: A Faith That Loves the Earth by stating:

**“One thing is needed, it is true, for his action, which we can never undo, to become the benediction of our human reality. He must break open the tomb of our hearts. He must rise from the center of our being also, where he is present as power and as promise. There he is still in movement. There it is still Holy Saturday until the last day which will be the universal Easter of the cosmos. And that resurrection takes place under the freedom of our faith. Even so it is his deed. But an action of his which takes place as our own, as an action of loving belief which takes us up into the tremendous movement of all earthly reality toward its own glory, which has begun in Christ’s resurrection.”**

May you and your family enjoy the fullness of Easter joy!