

Second Sunday of Easter 2020 - St. Ann's Church - Washington, DC

Homily by Msgr. Watkins, Pastor – April 19, 2020

My dear Parishioners and Friends of St. Ann's Church,

As we continue to be tested by this difficult ordeal of the contagion of the coronavirus which reaches almost every country in the world, I want to greet each one of you and to assure you of my prayers for you and your families and friends on this Second Sunday of Easter, Divine Mercy Sunday.

As we reflected at the beginning of Lent so long ago (it seems), none of us could have imagined the situation we have been experiencing. The current circumstances have prevented us from gathering for Mass, especially on Sundays – and perhaps not being in church last week on Easter Sunday was most difficult. Through it all, however, our beautiful church of St. Ann remains open during regular hours, but the absence of the Mass continues, no doubt, to be so strange for you, as it is for me, a parish priest. And this will have to go on and on for a long while, and who knows when things will return to “normal” – if they ever do! Without the public offering of Mass, though, we are still united by bonds of faith, hope, and love and through our personal prayer and sacrifices can mature spiritually.

It might not feel like Easter for us, but it IS Easter! Let's keep that in mind and heart right now! Even if it doesn't FEEL like it, Lent is over. Christ has once again conquered sin and death and promised the resurrection as the everlasting hope for all mankind. Therefore, we say, “Let us rejoice and be glad!” Hard as it may be, we set our eyes on a distant horizon right now, looking not just to a BETTER day when the pandemic is over (even though that's probably MOST before our eyes at this hour), but looking to the horizon of real and blessed hope that awaits us in the BEST of days, in heaven with Jesus in ETERNAL time. And this is not just some figment of our imagination or a made-up myth about life in general. No, let's get specific about what Easter is essentially all about: the resurrection of the body ... and the body of Jesus, in particular.

Now, don't get me wrong: I love Easter Bunnies and Easter eggs; I think most people do; it's what makes Easter "Easter" for the culture around us – like Santa does for Christmas. The Easter Bunny and colorful Easter eggs represent prolific fertility, that is, the springtime of new life. This has always been at the heart of fertility rites and rituals of springtime in most cultures which celebrate new life over the apparent death of winter. So, yes, springtime and new life are all around us again the natural course of things. That's what we see; that's what we like to see this time of year. So, bring on the Bunnies and Eggs, in one sense – because that's what is before our immediate eyes every spring and every time the culture celebrates the popular understanding of Easter.

But what we as Christians call Easter is not essentially about bunnies and eggs, as cute and pretty as are. When we say throughout the Easter Season, "Let us rejoice and be glad," we echo not really nature's general power of life over death, of spring over winter. For us who are religious believers, we celebrate not ONLY the general philosophy of life over death, but a powerful and unique life, a personal life which transcends every springtime and, in fact, propels us even now with eyes set on a heavenly garden where eternal life, the eternal springtime of life, is promised to those who keep the faith in Jesus. That personal life is Jesus Christ: His Life, His Death, His Resurrection.

In a word, then, because of the resurrection of the Jesus from the dead, the doctrine of the "resurrection of the body" is probably, among other tenants of our Christian faith, a distinctive belief, not just in a generic philosophy of life, but in the blessed assurance of eternal life, of eternal life over eternal death, of the eternal God victorious over sin and death in Jesus in glorified body from the dead. And this was what was before the immediate sense of sight of the disciples that first Easter.

It was for his reason, among others, that the early Church 2000 years ago set her eyes on the resurrection as the pivotal message of the Gospel. All of the miracles and teachings of Jesus, powerful and meaningful as they are, can only be viewed through the lens of what they were properly intended – a greater faith in the God-Man, Jesus Christ. And so, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead became early on the principle motivation of people's hearts and minds which would help them to transform their eyes from the various philosophical and religious interpretations of immortality to something very unique: the resurrection of the

body. Perhaps more than any other theme or belief in the Gospel, the Resurrection of the human body is what motivated the early Church to embrace Jesus fully when other philosophies and religious persuasions (popular and powerful for ions of time) no longer held them together.

Of course, the Resurrection belief was in part shared by some of the Pharisees at the time of Jesus, but it was unclear. While in fact many religions speculate about immortality in a vague manner, but no religion has ever articulated that belief with specific focus on a single person. Historically, the speculations of immortality came alive in an intense way it had never before been witnessed in the unique, real event of Jesus raised from the dead. And this is what drove the early Christians to greater and greater acceptance of Jesus – not just His wisdom and miraculous powers which they would forget when they fled from Him on that Good Friday.

When it comes to Easter, however, Jesus, raised from the dead, is not embraced in some philosophical manner, not in some psychological projection of general hope for life beyond death, not just in Bunnies and Fertility Rites. Rather, precisely because the first disciples could actually SEE, actually TOUCH Jesus again. Absolutely IN-credible! UN-Believable! Precisely what the world would call Incredible or Unbelievable is quite natural – who would believe what we have seen or heard? Actually, no one of any sound mind or intellect, as the resurrection of the body seems to defy all rules of physics.

Yet, Jesus appears to the first disciples not in some general philosophy. Remember, they were running for their lives; if caught, they knew they'd be next to die! No, He appears REAL, body to body, and blood to blood -- Keeping it real, as only God does best. They had to SEE; that's natural. God builds on that natural sense of our sight: They SAW and believed. God builds on the natural sense of our hearing; that's natural, too: They HEARD the words, "Peace be with you." And God builds on the natural sense of TASTE over the ensuing 40 days Jesus would remain on earth with them; and that's natural, too: "And he ATE and DRANK with them." They SAW, they HEARD, they TASTED! If any of us to experience Jesus after His real death in His real resurrection, we would have dropped everything to follow Him. As we have said before, following Jesus doesn't pay much in this life, but the "benefits are out of this world"!

So, Thomas is held up to represent all of us who, through the natural senses of the human body, believe in something because we have seen, because we have heard, because we have tasted. In this case, not a belief in some THING, but rather in some ONE. “Thomas, place your hand into the nail marks ... place your hand into my side ... Do not persist in your unbelief but believe.” On that note, we don’t merely believe in the Resurrection as a doctrine; rather, we believe in the One who gives us reason to believe in the Resurrection. This is way the personal encounter with Jesus by the disciples before, during, and after the Resurrection is what makes the doctrine a REAL belief, real belief in a real person – body to body, blood to blood. One just can’t get much closer or real than that! And He would tell those first disciples, “Blessed are those who have NOT seen, but believe.” That was meant for us, who believe because HE has said so through His Church these last 2000 years until the end of time. We today have that blessing of SEEING Jesus, HEARING Jesus, TASTING Jesus in the Eucharist, and TOUCHING Him with gift of the faith through Baptism and the Holy Spirit.

All of this, finally, (while a bit heady), is really meant to serve us now in our own age (as in every age), but particularly for us NOW during this time when most of us are hiding behind locked doors – just as the first disciples were. There, amidst their silent fears and anxiety, amidst the pain and suffering they remembered on Good Friday, amidst the uncertainty of their own lives and future for themselves and their families and loved ones, amidst it all – Jesus appears to them through locked doors and greets you, greets each one of us with those reassuring, comforting words, “Peace be with you.”

Deliver us, Lord, we pray, from every evil, graciously grant peace in our days, that by the help of your mercy, we may be free from sin and safe from all distress, as we await the blessed hope and the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ.”

The blessed hope is here even now under forms of Bread and Wine. His name is Jesus. He has been raised from the dead. For this reason, “Let us rejoice and be glad!” Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!

Blessed Easter, everyone!