

“The Trumpet Call of Victory and the Virtues of the Women at the Tomb”
Homily for Easter Vigil Mass
March 31, 2018

Introduction

Easter is a time of the year that is very rich in symbols, even in popular culture and even to this day, symbols which all speak to us of new life. One can think, for example, of the widespread use of bunny rabbits in popular Easter celebrations. Other symbols are more exclusive to the church, such as water. Yes, we use water throughout the year as a powerful symbol, but in abundance during Easter as we recall the new life of our Baptism. Then there is the ever-present symbol of the egg, an ancient Christian symbol of Easter that has gained much popularity in the secular culture as well.

Unexpected Victory

Another such symbol common to both Church and secular culture is that of the Easter lily. The lily is symbolic of Easter because it is shaped like a trumpet. A trumpet, you may ask? Yes, a trumpet. We just heard this proclaimed in the Exsultet, the Easter proclamation that was sung right after we entered into the main body of the church: “let the trumpet of salvation sound aloud our mighty King’s triumph.”

In ancient times, and actually even up to relatively recently in history, that is, before the invention of wireless means of communication, the trumpet was used to give signals on the battlefield. One such signal was the trumpet call of victory. And so it came to represent for Christians a symbol of the ultimate victory, Christ’s victory over death by his Resurrection from the tomb. So tonight we sound aloud the trumpet of salvation that signals our mighty King’s triumph.

Such is the message of Easter: unexpected victory from what seemed certain defeat. The symbols we use in this Easter Vigil service also speak of this unexpected victory. In the opening rites, the Paschal Candle was adorned with five grains of incense, to represent the five wounds of Christ. His wounded, dead body, seemed a definitive defeat. A candle is lit using flint to make a spark. Flint is rock, to remind us of Christ’s tomb hewn from rock, and covered with a huge boulder. That certainly gives a sense of finality to the defeat.

But is this only according to human wisdom, our limited human way of seeing things. And so it was back then: Jesus was abandoned by his closest followers; only his Mother and a faithful few remained by his side to the end, and saw to his burial. Everyone else fled in the spirit of defeat. But the power of God transcends human reasoning, and His wisdom defeats our human powers of destruction. So what seemed like an ultimate defeat God turned into the ultimate victory: death destroyed, and the possibility of living forever held out to us.

God’s Wisdom

One may ask, though, what difference this makes in our own lived reality here and now in this world. After all, there is still plenty of evil in the world, and people are beset by suffering of all kinds. To find an answer to this question, we can take a cue from those faithful few followers, specifically, the women we hear about in the Gospel account of the discovery of the empty tomb.

Those grains of incense placed in the Paschal Candle represent not only the five wounds on Christ’s body, but also the spices the women brought to anoint his body. These spices are

aromatic substances, just as incense is aromatic, and they were rubbed onto a corpse in order to reduce the stench. This was a prescribed Jewish ritual, but in the case of Christ's death there was no time to perform it; he had to be buried quickly before the start of the Sabbath that evening. So these women waited until after the Sabbath. Since the Sabbath ends at sundown, they must have taken that evening to purchase the spices, which is why they then went early next the morning to the tomb. But why did they even bother? The body was already sealed in the tomb with a huge boulder. The stench would have been well contained. And, as the Gospel story indicates, they had to face the problem of finding a way of rolling back the stone. And, there would have already been a great stench, anyway. They went to all of this trouble to do something that was, really, from the practical standpoint, unnecessary. So why did they do it?

Burying the dead is a corporal work of mercy we get from the Scriptures. Jewish law prescribed this ritual anointing. The women certainly were not going to get anything in return for this great inconvenience, but they were determined to do so simply as an act of devotion. So great was their love for Jesus, and their devotion to their religion, that they would carry out this ritual even though it had no practical purpose, and even in the face of all kinds of inconvenience and challenges. Their pure act of devotion, and from which they stood to gain nothing in return, was rewarded with the revelation of the greatest gift God would ever give to the human race: the discovery of the empty tomb, the sign of Christ's Resurrection, his victory over death.

Victory in Our Own Lives

This is how God operates in carrying out His great works of salvation, and this is how He operates in our own lives. For the Resurrection of Jesus to make a difference in our own lives, we need to appropriate to ourselves the kind of devotion modeled for us by the women at the tomb. That is, we need to live by God's wisdom, not our limited human wisdom.

Think, for example, of how you spend your time. How much time do you spend in prayer, every day? How much time do you spend doing things that are superfluous, or a waste of time? God has given us only so much time in this world, and we must be wise in using it to know Him and love Him well. Many people spend a lot of time on what is superficial and passing away; why would anyone want to do that when instead they could be praying, or learning more about the faith by reading and studying, and so acquire the wisdom of God? And even if it is time spent that will yield an increase of material prosperity, what good would that do if God is left out of the picture? For example, do you make a priority of attending Mass every Sunday without fail, and frequently availing yourself of the sacrament of Confession? Human wisdom might dictate that one could spend that time doing things that are more "useful," or more fun. But for one who truly loves God, what could be more useful than spending time with Him, and acquiring His wisdom?

We live out the devotion of these women by living out well and faithfully our own vocation, that calling which God gave us to serve Him in this life and to grow in friendship with Him and to live in happiness with Him. It means living out that vocation faithfully in the immediate circumstances around us, in our family life, in our workplace, in all the communities to which we belong. To be honest and generous, even if we won't get any credit for it: this is what is useful in those matters that have eternal consequence.

And what about taking time to serve the needy? How much time do you spend having fun for yourself, versus helping those in need? Any experience of serving the poor – no matter what form that poverty might take – reveals that the real happiness lies in sharing Christ's love with others, thinking of others before oneself.

Conclusion

All of this points to another reminder that the flint, from which a candle is lit, gives us. Flint, as stone, is reminiscent of the cornerstone, mentioned in the prophecy of Psalm 118 and sung tonight right before the Gospel, in the first outburst of Alleluia since Ash Wednesday: "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." The cornerstone is the foundation of the entire building; only those who build their house on a solid cornerstone will see their house still standing after exposure to destructive elements of nature and the wear and tear of the years. And the spark from that flint which lights the Easter candle signals to us the light of Christ's Resurrection.

So it is with our lives. We want to live well, we want to bask in the glory of Christ's Resurrection, we want God to be pleased with us and to be there for us. But are we there for God? Building our lives on the rock solid foundation of Jesus Christ by living the virtues of the women at the tomb, practicing selfless devotion and truly seeking to please only God no matter the inconvenience or the challenges: *that* will give us glimpses of his light. And then, by his grace, we will move from light into light, toward the light that never ends, the light of God's eternal Kingdom, when the trumpet of salvation will sound the final victory of our mighty King's triumph, and we share the glory of his victory over death in his presence, world without end. Amen.