

“Look Up and Look Around to Make Easter Faith Real Here and Now”
Homily for Easter Vigil, Year “B”
April 3, 2021; St. Mary’s Cathedral

Introduction

We are blessed to be able to return to worship inside of our churches for these most sacred days of the year for us. It comes as a source of relief and happiness to us all, especially considering how drastically different life was a year ago, even if we still have to practice certain safety precautions to ensure we remain responsible for public health. And, I would say that we are doubly blessed here, in San Francisco in our Cathedral, given the very beautiful Cathedral that we have. Maybe even triply blessed, because of the artwork that adorns this already beautiful Cathedral. I am grateful to my predecessors who have attended to adorning this Cathedral with the artwork we can now enjoy and from which we can draw inspiration.

Most noteworthy of the artwork are the bronze reliefs depicting significant moments in the life of our Lady that are placed throughout the church. The one depicting the scene of the crucifixion, in the back of the church, has a peculiar detail to it. It *is* a very dramatic work, with the Blessed Mother kneeling at her Son’s feet and the centurion with his lance mounted on a horse, about to pierce the side of the dead Jesus. I’ve been told by a reliable source of information on the history of the Cathedral, though, that the rector at the time was somewhat alarmed to see that the artist had not put a nail into Christ’s feet. There are large nails in the hands, but none in the feet.

He was concerned about this apparent oversight and contacted the sculptor in Italy. The artist assured him that it was no mistake. He had intentionally not put a nail there. Why? The artist explained to the priest, “I gave a slight upward thrust to the body of Christ on the Cross to suggest the beginning of the Resurrection; a nail put there would draw the viewer’s eye back down.”

Looking Up

Of course, it takes faith to perceive the mystery of Easter beneath the sorrow of Good Friday, and the artist understood that we need to keep our vision focused upwards in order to do that. Already the prophet Isaiah was exhorting God’s people to do this, reminding them of how high above our limited human vision is the majesty of God. In the long series of readings from the Old Testament for this Easter Vigil, we heard in the fifth reading Isaiah speaking the following words as the mouthpiece of the Lord: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts.”

The glorification of Christ, and our participation in that, orients us towards an upward movement. The Church gives us many reminders to keep our eyes focused there. We have, of course, this greatest of celebrations, Easter, and also the Solemnity of the Ascension of our Lord into heaven, as well as the Solemnity of the Assumption of our Lady, to whom our Cathedral is dedicated. How appropriate, then, that our Cathedral is constructed with a very forceful upward thrust, moving us to gaze upwards towards the heavens where Christ reigns in glory and his mother as Queen of heaven and earth.

How desperately we need this reminder in our own time. It is always our human tendency, given our fallen human nature, to look downwards, and I would even say not to look beyond oneself. To profess faith in the Resurrection carries a certain ethical dimension. Again

the prophet Isaiah was anticipating this in this same prophecy, where right before he says: "Seek the LORD while he may be found, call him while he is near. Let the scoundrel forsake his way, and the wicked man his thoughts; let him turn to the LORD for mercy; to our God, who is generous in forgiving." This is what St. Paul is referring to in his Letter to the Romans when he speaks of us "being dead to sin and living for God in Christ Jesus." The one enlightened by the glory of Christ's Resurrection can see clearly how to act in a way that comports with the dignity of being a child of God.

Which brings us to the other aspect of living the grace of the Resurrection: the spiritual dimension. For this we need look no further than our father in faith, Abraham. He is the first one to put his trust in the one, true God, staking everything on God's word to him. His son Isaac was his one means of continuing his lineage. He was willing to sacrifice everything, even what was most precious to him, to obey God's word. This is the obedience of faith, which trusts that doing God's will, following God's way and not one's own, is the way to life and true goodness. It is confidence in the assurance that God gives us, which we heard in the other passage from the prophet Isaiah in our readings tonight: "Though the mountains leave their place and the hills be shaken, my love shall never leave you nor my covenant of peace be shaken, says the LORD, who has mercy on you."

Looking Around

This is keeping our vision focused upwards. There is another noteworthy aspect to our Cathedral, though, which contrasts but complements its great vertical movement: the windows that look out onto the city. While we have to keep our vision focused looking upwards, we also sometimes have to look around, taking notice of who and what is around us, reading the signs of the times and responding to the needs and crises confronting us, so that our faith might be made real in the here and now.

This very distressing year of the pandemic we have just traversed is one such sign we must read. I see a lot of light as well as darkness. The suffering is all too well known to us: physical, economic, emotional and mental, and spiritual. But let us not lose sight of the heroes of this pandemic. I recall hearing stories of people looking out for their elderly neighbors who could not risk going out to obtain food for themselves, doing grocery shopping for them and chores around the home.

I think of healthcare workers who worked themselves to the point of exhaustion, putting at risk their own health and even their life to care for those afflicted by this virus. I think also of hospital chaplains who have done the same, some of whom, as some healthcare workers, contracted the virus and, in some cases, even died from it. I think of first responders, and others whose work had to continue for the basic functioning of society and required them to work outside the home at risk of contracting the virus. I think of our own Catholic Charities workers here in San Francisco, who continued to feed and provide transportation to the homeless living on the streets when everyone else had abandoned them.

Our Christian belief in the Resurrection was foreshadowed by our ancestors in faith in the one, true God. It is an ancient Jewish belief that a resurrection will happen at the end of the world when all will rise in Jerusalem. It is something foreseen at the consummation of all history. But what Jesus Christ does, God's coeternal Son, the Second Person of the Most Holy Trinity who took on our human flesh, is to make the Resurrection a reality already now, in our own time, in our own space. We follow the pattern of Christ's Resurrection when we make that

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faith real here and now. The ethical and spiritual dimensions of our Easter faith coalesce and become visible when we truly live as an Easter people.

Conclusion

Let us, then, march forward toward that encounter with the risen Christ, keeping our vision focused upwards to the life of glory while we look around us to cast the light of his glory into the dark recesses of this world of our own time and space. He is risen, he reigns in glory, and he is merciful to us sinners. Thanks be to God!