"He is not here, for he has been raised just as he said."

Homily by Most Reverend John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo

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Easter Sunday

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“Do not be afraid! You are seeking Jesus the crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised just as he said.” With these words, an angel announces the most important event in history. Jesus Christ is risen, and the world will never be the same! My brothers and sisters, on this holy day, I wish each of you a happy and blessed Easter. Of course we are disappointed that we cannot come together for this greatest of all celebrations, but we can still be sure of one fact: Christ is truly risen, and he lives forever!

Sometime before the sun had risen on that first day of the week, when it was still dark, Christ came forth from the tomb as a light in the darkness. The Easter candle, which we blessed last night, burns brightly as a reminder that Christ is risen and alive, and he comes forth from the darkness of death, bringing light to all who believe in him. The powers of darkness threw everything they had at Jesus: temptation, ridicule, mockery, torture, and even the most cruel death possible. He was sealed into the darkness and cold of the tomb. But Jesus overcame all of this. Death had its way on Good Friday, but death couldn’t hold him. Jesus came forth from the tomb alive. He had conquered death, and as Paul tells us, death would never have power over him again.

On that Easter morning, when it was still dark and the light was just beginning to dawn, Mary Magdalene and the other women came to visit the tomb of Jesus, as was their custom. And as they arrived, Matthew tells us there was a great earthquake, the ground was shaken. But this was just a hint of an even greater earthquake. An angel rolled away the stone and declared to them that Jesus the crucified was risen! The One who had died a cruel death on the cross was alive! Not only was the ground shaken, but the world, the heavens and the earth were shaken and turned upside down. Peter and John came too, running to see the sight of the empty tomb. John tells us they didn’t yet understand what all of this meant, but went in, and “he saw and believed.” This beloved disciple who stood at the cross and saw Jesus die began to grasp the truth that Jesus lives.

Just as the tomb was thrown open by the resurrection of Jesus, so our lives are opened up too. He casts aside the heavy stone of sin and the doom of death that hangs over us, that holds us down, and he opens for us the gate to true life. We were earthbound, but now Jesus makes us citizens of heaven. We were under the certainty of death, but Jesus assures us of eternal life. Everything is changed for us because of the resurrection of Jesus.

We shouldn’t think that our Lord’s resurrection only makes a difference when we die. No, the resurrection is for the living! We already share in his risen life, and that should make a difference in the way we live from day to day. Paul says, “If then you were raised with Christ, seek what is above….not what is on earth.” The world around us goes about its business as if God doesn’t exist, as if there were nothing more than what we see and feel and choose here and now. In so many ways, our world has come to glamorize sin and death; it has forgotten the beauty of life. But life in Christ, life in the risen Christ, is endlessly hopeful and joyful, and yes, beautiful. Because we live in him, even when we encounter the sadness and sin of this world, we never lose hope. He gives new meaning to our lives, and he opens to us a horizon as wide as God’s own love. As Easter people, we recognize Christ in each other, we know we are made for happiness in heaven, and we can begin to live that Easter joy even now.

One of the magnificent parts of the Easter celebration is the celebration of Baptism, and Confirmation, and First Eucharist. Since the earliest days of the Church, Easter has been the moment when new Christians were initiated into the life of the Church, when they participated for the first time in these signs of grace given us by Christ himself. In fact, Easter is always a time to celebrate and renew our
Baptism, because baptism is a sharing in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Paul tells us: “We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life.”

Every member of the Church, baptized in Christ, already shares in his risen life. We are united in him, joined to our brothers and sisters all over the world by the power of his resurrection, by the power of his life. The risen Christ also breathes forth his own Spirit and fills us with the gifts of his grace that will help us to live entirely as his disciples. And through the Eucharist, we share in the body and blood, soul and divinity of the risen Christ, we become one with him in his risen glory. So today, with Christians all over the world, we will renew our baptismal promises, and we will make a spiritual communion, trusting that the grace of our risen Lord will come to us wherever we are.

The resurrection of Jesus is the hinge and the keystone of our faith. If Jesus had not risen, would the apostles have preached him all over the world? If Jesus had not risen, would they or anyone else have died for him? Would his teachings, challenging as they are, still be followed? If Jesus were not risen, would we be here today? Perhaps he would be remembered as a wise man who threatened the powers of this world but failed in his mission and died. But Jesus has risen, he lives, and that makes all the difference in the world. It makes us different too. The earth is shaken, and the light shines forth. Jesus is risen, and we are risen in him. Amen, Alleluia!