

11 April 2020

Easter Vigil

Matthew 28:1-10

I heard that at one of the press conferences this week a reporter commented that this would be the first time in our nation's history that Easter would not be celebrated. I guess we know he misspoke. Further, we know that we need to celebrate Easter more than ever this year. How should we do that?

One way I don't want to celebrate it is by just "putting on a happy face." Like saying, "Oh, your cousin in New York is in intensive care? Well, Christ is Risen, though, right?" **Easter hope**, Easter joy, is not something meant to be alongside or separate from our fears and pain and losses; it is not an optimistic add-on. **It is not a happy thought to distract us from our pain.** It is, as we sang earlier, "within our darkest night" that God "kindles a fire that never dies away." So, it is very often with a sober heart, aware of the cross that we sing "Alleluia."

We sing "Alleluia" this year with keen awareness that we need Easter. We need God to kindle that flame of faith that gives us confidence that hope is stronger than despair, love stronger than selfishness, and life stronger than death. That's why we hear all these stories in our readings of God with us. God who was with us from the very beginning of Creation, and brought Jesus through his passion and death to Resurrection, will sustain us and show us new life.

Maybe, even probably, life will be different after this crisis, in ways that maybe now we can't imagine. One commentator said that this year's Easter is the most like the original Easter than we've ever had in recent years. Like the first followers of Jesus, we do not know when or how things will end. We struggle to believe in the possibility of new life. I have a friend who drives truck now between Green Bay and Chicago. He wrote a beautiful reflection about faith and this crisis that concluded with, "**This has been our time to be humbled by something beyond our control. I hear so many prayers for a return to normalcy. Perhaps our prayers should be that we awaken to a better way.**" Easter people think that way.

Easter people believe that even in hard times there is Good News. I took a Bible course last Fall from a very fine teacher, David Neuhaus, SJ. During the first class one of us students said something like, "Which one of the Gospels was written first?" Seems like a fair question, right? He looked at us and started scratching himself all over. Then he said, "I'm sorry, but I have a severe allergy that starting to break out now." We were concerned...until he said, "**I have an allergy to the word 'Gospels,' and he emphasized the plural ending, 'Gospelzzz.'**" "**You should never make a plural of that word! Gospel means the Good News and there is one Gospel and it is this: God became human in Jesus Christ and through his death and resurrection we can have eternal life.**"

At Easter we proclaim this Gospel, this Good News. Doing so does not push our pain aside, but it puts our pain within a wider story.

I don't know **what it's like to be in an intensive care unit struggling to breathe.** My prayer for me and anyone in that situation is that **there is something good and beautiful beyond that pain**, whether in this life still or in the next.

So, the last time I was at the gym before all of them closed down, I noticed before I hopped on the elliptical machine that behind me on the treadmill was Tim, a good guy who used to work in law enforcement. People make fun of me for using the elliptical, like it's not a real workout. Well, hey, I crank up the resistance and do sprints and try to keep my pulse up over 150, in spurts, so that's good, right? So, I'm doing this that day with Tim behind me and my pulse meter says it's like getting close to 160, and so I start to ease up in case I get a heart attack or something. Then I thought. Hey, Tim must know CPR because he was in law enforcement. So, I'll be ok. Whether that was the soundest reasoning or not, it held sway and I kept cranking away at a high pulse rate, knowing Tim had my back.

It's Good News that someone has your back. Two times in the Gospel account from Matthew the first witnesses to Resurrection are told "Do not be afraid!" Once by the angel and once by Jesus himself. New life that we do not expect and is beyond our control can be scary. Not knowing the future can be scary, but Jesus calls us back to Galilee where we learned to serve, to forgive, to love even our enemies. And we will see him. If we fail, the Risen One will pick us up.

You might have noted that I put too much confidence in Tim because sometimes CPR doesn't work and people die from heart attacks. I'll remember that next time, but on this night I will remember and fix in my heart that **what Tim would be unable to do, is God's bread and butter, even since that first Easter morn when he carried his Son through death to life.**