

Fr. Curtis Miller

April 3-4, 2020

Homily for Easter

It's a sad fact that the persecution of Christians is particularly common during Holy Week. This past weekend, a pair of suicide bombers attacked the cathedral in Makassar, Indonesia, wounding twenty people gathered to worship on Palm Sunday. On Tuesday, Father Ferdinand Fanen Ngugban had just offered Mass at St. Paul's Church in Aye-Twar, Nigeria, and was preparing to leave for his Diocese's Chrism Mass, when the church was attacked by gunmen. The priest and six parishioners were killed. Sadly, there are probably many other acts of violence perpetrated against our fellow Christians that we haven't even heard about in the news. Many of these people, modern martyrs, live in areas where they know that they are risking their lives to openly practice our faith.

So why do they do it? Because of the Good News we celebrate tonight/today. In His resurrection, Christ has truly risen, victorious over sin and death. As we look around us, there is still so much darkness in our world. Yet into the midst of that darkness has come a light, a tiny flickering flame, the first glimmer of hope that the suffering and death offered by this world will not have the final word. Because Christ has risen from the dead, we are given the hope that if we follow Jesus in this life, then He will raise us to eternal life with Him in Heaven. Tonight/last night, we brought the Paschal Candle into the darkness of the church. And one by one, we each received light from this candle. On Easter, we are entrusted with the light of Christ, to be kept burning brightly in our hearts.

This is the hope that motivated our fellow Christians around the world to gather to celebrate Holy Week, even in places where they know this means risking their lives. Right now, there are Christians lying in hospital beds in Indonesia and in a morgue in Nigeria. Yet they lie there in hope because once Jesus lay in a tomb, but *He lies there no longer!* Jesus has risen from the dead and He promises us a share in His resurrection. The issue of persecution of Christians is serious, but our belief in Jesus' resurrection is even more serious and more powerful.

I know that we all come here with different levels of faith. Some of us might be completely convinced of our faith, while others of us might be here just because it's the thing to do, or because our families forced us to come. Whatever the case may be for you, I'm glad that you're here, and I'd encourage all of us to reflect upon the faith of Christians who are willing to die for their faith in Jesus.

Faith in Christ's resurrection has inspired Christians around the world and down through the centuries to follow Jesus, to worship Him, and to proclaim His Gospel boldly, even to the point of death. How do they have such strength and courage? Because they have personally encountered the Risen Christ. And that is exactly what we are supposed to do when we celebrate Easter. We must allow ourselves to encounter the Risen Christ and be transformed by Him.

This happened with Jesus' apostles. When He was arrested, they hid in fear. Peter denied three times that he even knew Jesus. Yet on the third day, they saw Christ, risen from the dead. They spoke with Jesus, ate meals with Him, and even were invited to touch His wounds. This was not a vision or wishful thinking. They truly saw the Risen Christ. And this encounter transformed them. They were suddenly willing to stand up before crowds, boldly preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Of these apostles, all but St. John would meet a martyr's death [represented by the images on the ceiling of this church: spears, crosses, swords, and other implements of torture]. They were willing to endure death because they knew that they had seen the Risen Christ, and they were convinced that Jesus would raise them to eternal life, too.

But perhaps the most remarkable transformation came later, when the Risen Christ appeared to Saul, a persecutor of Christians. Like these modern-day persecutors, Saul thought that Christians were infidels, and that it would please God to arrest or kill them. But one day the Risen Christ appeared to this most unlikely person, saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?" (Here Jesus makes clear that He is with us whenever we suffer persecution or any other suffering). This encounter transformed Saul. He became St. Paul, one of the most prolific apostles, [patron of this church,] and ultimately a martyr himself, beheaded in Rome.

If an encounter with the Risen Christ could so radically change the lives of St. Paul and the other apostles, what could it do for us? Christ is still risen, He remains in our midst, and He listens to our prayers. This Easter, let's open up our hearts to the Risen Christ, more deeply than we ever have before, and allow Him to transform us by the power of His glorious resurrection.