

## **The Resurrection of the Lord at the Easter Vigil in the Holy Night of Easter**

What we just heard the Angel say to the holy women at the empty tomb on that first Easter morning, is worth repeating again and again: *“The Crucified One is not here; He has been raised just as He said; come and see the place where He was. Then go quickly and tell His disciples: ‘He has been raised from the dead!’”*

That is the message of Easter! That is the Good News that the world was longing to hear. And I’m fairly certain that is the Good News that all of us, weary from so much bad news, sad news, and news of disease and death, have been longing to hear. Let the **“Alleluia’s”** ring out again; let the Joyful message be proclaimed; and let our hearts rejoice, in spite of everything else going on around us, because Jesus has been raised from the dead, and we have been redeemed!

As we find ourselves here in our Cathedral Church at this relatively late hour, celebrating what is arguably the most beautiful and important Vigil of the entire Liturgical Year, we find an empty Cathedral, and 58 equally empty churches in all the parishes of our Diocese. The dramatic and extreme world-wide restrictions imposed on all people around the world to keep us separated from one another are not done as a punishment, but in an effort to “stop the spread” of the powerful coronavirus/COVID-19. But it feels like our 40-day Lent filled with prayer, sacrifice and fasting, which has actually ended, has now been indefinitely extended. For days and presumably weeks still to come, we are being asked to keep praying for safety, protection, and relief; to keep sacrificing; to keep fasting from social interaction, and most importantly for us, the spiritual satisfaction we long for from receiving the Eucharist and the other Sacraments.

But I know that this Cathedral and our churches are not really empty. I am thrilled to know that so many of you are virtually here with us and participating thru the internet. In fact, I am told that more than one-third of our parishes are livestreaming their own celebrations of the Easter Vigil and tomorrow’s Easter Sunday Masses, and have been doing so throughout this Holy Week; that most of our Collaboratives are connected to livestreaming broadcasts; and that these Masses are being made available in 4 languages to connect with our diverse Catholic population here in our Diocese. And considering that none of us were doing any of that just a few weeks ago, greatly impresses me with all that our priests and people have done to make sure that even though we are restricted to our homes, we can still virtually be “joined together” for the celebration of our Faith as much as we possibly can.

You may notice that this beautiful Easter Vigil has had to be modified in some aspects of our normal celebration this year because of the pandemic. The beautiful rite of blessing the New Fire, and lighting the Easter Candle, had to be abbreviated. Soon, you will notice that the Blessing of the Water, along with the Baptism of Catechumens and the Reception of Candidates into the Church, have also had to be postponed. To all of you---- the Catechumens and Candidates throughout our Diocese---I want you to know that we are all as disappointed as you are. I know you have looked forward to this Holy Night of the Easter Vigil when you were to be baptized or when you were going to make your Profession of Faith; when you would have received the Sacrament of Confirmation; when you would have been able to receive your First Holy Communion. But I urge you not to lose heart; continue your prayerful preparation. We are now looking forward to the great Solemnity of Pentecost when, God willing, that great spiritual moment will be realized for all of you. Until then, know that we will all keep praying for you.

However, in spite of what we are NOT able to do, I prefer to focus on what we are doing, and what we must celebrate, wherever we are, and whatever our circumstances might be.

One of the powerful images of this most important Vigil Mass of the Year is the constant struggle between the powers of darkness and the power of light. As the first of our Readings this evening from the first verses of the Book of Genesis, the first Book in the Bible, put it: "*In the beginning when God created the world, darkness covered the abyss.*" And the first words spoken by the Creator are: "*Let there be light!*" As we began tonight's Vigil Mass, with the Church in total darkness representing the world without Christ, the Paschal Candle, representing the Risen Lord, enters the Church and dispels the darkness. And we call out those life-renewing and reassuring words: "Light of Christ"! And wholeheartedly respond: "Thanks be to God!" Then the Joyful Exultet (sung so beautifully by our Cathedral Rector, Fr. Bob) proclaimed that "darkness" has been overcome, sin has been defeated, and death has been conquered in Jesus, the Light of the World.

Our God is a God of Light, of Life, and of Love. The Readings from tonight's extended Liturgy of the Word reminded us about God our Creator in Genesis, God our Deliverer in Exodus, God Who is Faithful to His Covenant in the Reading from Isaiah; that in spite of the times when we break our part of the covenant and turn away from God, God remains faithful to us.

And all of that good news of God's Creative, Saving and Faithful Love for us culminates in St. Matthew's Gospel account of Jesus' Resurrection. Matthew was very precise in his description. As Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were coming to the Tomb early on Sunday morning, there was "*a great earthquake*". And that "earthquake" appears to have been caused by the "*Angel of the Lord*" who, as St. Matthew told us, "*descended from Heaven, approached, rolled back the stone, and sat upon it.*" The women saw the Angel; and the guards did too. Matthew tells us they "*were shaken with fear...and became like dead men.*" Then the Angel delivered the Good News in the words with which I began tonight's Homily: "*Do not be afraid!--- Jesus, the Crucified, is not here; He has been raised.*"

That's the essential Easter Message. It's recorded with some slight variations in each of the other Gospel accounts, but the point is: Jesus was dead and buried; but 3 days later, the Tomb is empty, and Jesus has been raised. He was not just restored to the life He had; no, He was raised to a New Life.

That's also the message St. Paul wants us to understand in tonight's Second Reading in his Letter to the Romans. Our Baptism unites us with Christ, not only in His Death but in His New Life. As St. Paul put it: "*Just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too live in newness of life.*"

So, despite this world-wide pandemic, and the quarantines, restrictions, and isolation that we are experiencing because of that, this is still Easter. Even though we can't come together to celebrate the greatest Feast of our Faith, and in spite of the modifications that we have had to make even to this most important of all Vigil Masses, the Easter message remains the same: "*Do not be afraid! Jesus the Crucified is not dead in a Tomb; He has been raised....Go, and tell this Good News.*" We know all too well the negative and restrictive impacts these last couple weeks have had on us. More importantly, we're all too aware of how life-threatening this worldwide health crisis is; the huge numbers of people who have died; the incredible efforts that are being made by those who are truly heroic who are working day and night to find cures, treatments, solutions; those who are caring for the sick and dying; those who are keeping all

essential businesses functioning so we can live; and those who are making communication possible thru the internet and technological advances.

We know what we can't do. But I've been noticing that while we've been in this "crisis mode" of living, there have also been some positive outcomes. We've tended to be more aware of what's truly important in our lives; we've focused on getting our life's priorities re-ordered; that those in our lives whom we love take on a greater importance, and perhaps we take less for granted.

I've noticed also that besides concern for ourselves and our own families, there's more of a concern about others' well-being; we're very aware of all the health experts' reports, and very troubled by the number of people suffering in our own area, in our state, in this country, and also around the world.

I think I'm sensing a greater compassion for people suffering, wherever they live, despite their national origin, their religious affiliation, their race or their political persuasion. I've sensed a greater awareness of the needs of the human family, not just my own family.

I think we've all become more aware of the reality of our own vulnerability, fragile human nature---our own mortality; that we are not indestructible. We have come to an unsettling awareness, while we can feel secure in our national defenses against international enemies, that we are very vulnerable and can be defeated by an enemy that is microscopic, unseen, and pretty much unknown.

There is much more conversation about ways that we can help one another, despite state, national, or international boundaries; there is less conversation about building walls, or being concerned only for our own.

During these weeks of anxiety, fear and worry, I believe more people have found their way back to God, praying for His guidance, strength and protection than ever before. And I pray, that even after we don't have to maintain "social distancing" any more, or be afraid to interact with one another, that we will just as carefully do all that we can to avoid the "virus" of sin, which when it exerts power over our choices, can cause far greater damage to our spiritual lives and our eternal destiny than even this coronavirus can do to our physical lives.

In the midst of all of this, we celebrate the Good News of Easter---the best news ever recorded in the history of humankind. Jesus has broken the bonds of sin and death! While there are still consequences of sin all around us---poverty, injustice, wars, famine, racism, and all that results from sinful/selfish choices made by any/all of us---the lasting death-dealing consequence of Sin has been broken by Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection.

And while human death remains for all of us a reality, as St. Paul reminds us, "*If we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him....Who dies no more.*" Easter's good news is that even when we die, as long as we are united with Christ, that we too will live "*in newness of life*". Again, like Jesus Who wasn't returned to a former life, but raised to new life, when we face our human deaths, we too will be raised to new and eternal life with Christ forever.

So, while we look forward to the end of this pandemic, and an end to all the restrictions under which we are living, I pray that we will not look forward to going back to the way things were. Rather, this Easter, may we look forward to taking on that "new person", seeing our lives differently because we have survived this great challenge, AND because we have united ourselves more closely with Christ, the Light of the World. But St. Paul said it so much more

eloquently: “*Consequently, you too must think of yourselves as dead to sin, and living for God, in Christ Jesus.*”

Since we are unable to come to Easter Mass and receive the Sacraments, we need to find alternate ways to demonstrate that we are “Easter People”. I have therefore been encouraging everyone to find a way to “Let Jesus’ Light Shine”. You can do so by illuminating your homes with special lights; by decorating your lawns with the Cross or other Christian symbol. But mostly you can show that you are followers of Jesus, the Light of the World, by letting the Light of Jesus’ Love shine through your very lives---in what you say, in how you act, in the choices that you make when this pandemic is over, in the new ways that you try to avoid “regressing” back to the way things were before, but “renewing” yourself to live in the newness of Christ’s Love. “Let Jesus’ Light Shine” is much more than a slogan. It’s the summary of the *Exultet* which we proclaimed as Christ dispels the darkness of our world, the effects of sin, and the ultimate power of death.

Jesus the Crucified is not dead in a Tomb; He has been raised.

If that good news touches your heart, and calls you to live your life in new ways, then join Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, join with the Apostles and the first band of disciples, and rejoice in the Good News of the Risen Jesus: “Do not be afraid! Go, and tell this Good News to all your sisters and brothers”, and “live your lives for God, in Jesus Christ, our Risen Lord”, Alleluia!!!