

Easter Sunday – April 12, 2020 – Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, Portland
Acts 10: 34a, 37-43; Cor 5: 6b-8; Jn 20: 1-9

Good morning and Happy Easter! I had a text message from a friend yesterday wanting to wish me a happy Easter and telling me that it seemed very strange not to be able to attend services this year. It is strange, and it is unsettling. But it is what we have been asked to do, and it will hopefully get us through this crisis more quickly, so we do it. I was on the radio being interviewed on Friday about Easter services, and I was asked if I thought we would be using more of these virtual Masses when this crisis was over. I answered that it has been great to have this technology, but it is virtual. It is not real. And, if we have learned anything from this COVID-19 crisis, it is that we need relationship. We need to be together. As I worked on my homily this week, I was thinking ahead and, as I like to do, looking into the church to see all of you, forgetting for a moment that you would be with me online. I realized, at that moment, that I would miss one of the happy things of Easter. Along with chocolate coming back into the picture, I always like to see if there are any colorful Easter hats in the congregation. So, if you are wearing one at home, please send me a message. I will be sure it is Easter if I see a bright colorful hat.

In my Easter message this year, I acknowledge that we are living in a unique time with a historically challenging crisis in this pandemic. It has also been a difficult time. As the number of deaths increases, it becomes harder to bear. We wonder where this will go and how it will come to an end. Our anxieties are real, but we have learned that the human spirit is strong, and with the help of God, we will move through this crisis. In fact, our coming together for Mass and listening to the story of Easter is a step forward. It helps us to remember what we celebrate here in faith. What we believe helps us in this time of crisis.

In the Gospel, Easter begins quietly early in the morning. Mary Magdalene went to the tomb of Jesus. When she arrived, she was surprised and upset. The stone closing the tomb was rolled back. The tomb was open. Her first thought, “he has been taken.” She runs to find the apostles Peter and John who quickly follow her back to the tomb. Peter entered the tomb first. At this moment, he has no reaction. But John, the beloved disciple, enters, and we are told, “he saw and believed.” But what did he see? In fact, he saw nothing for the tomb was empty except for the burial cloths in which Jesus had been dressed after he was taken down from the cross on Friday. John, the beloved disciple, came to understand in faith what Jesus had been telling him and the other disciples. On the third day, he would be raised up from

death.

The Gospel this morning is a simple account. It is not the triumphant picture which we might see in Renaissance art with Jesus bursting forth from the tomb triumphant over death and the injustice of his sentence. Easter begins quietly in the Gospel but, with reflection, the enormous message of the “empty tomb” becomes clearer.

St. Ambrose was the bishop of Milan in the 4th century. He was a holy, learned, and influential bishop. He wrote a hymn which helps us to understand the significance of what happened on that first Easter morning.

“O mystery great and glorious
That mortal flesh should conquer death,
And all our human pains and wounds,
The Lord should heal by bearing them.”

These words capture what that first glimmer of Easter faith in the eyes of John, the beloved disciple, would mean as the quiet event of Easter morning was lived.

The Jesus who lived for us and died for us is risen from the dead. This is the mystery at the heart of the Christian faith. It is a simple statement we make, but it is extraordinary and powerful. It was so astounding that even Peter, whom Jesus had spoken to about it, had difficulty believing it when it happened. The same was true for the other disciples. It shattered all their concepts of life. In the whole history of humanity death was the greatest fear, the curse to wish or inflict on your worst enemies. In Jesus, it was conquered. “Christ is Risen” says it all. We can no longer live the same way now that death has been defeated in Christ. “Christ is Risen” is the greeting of Easter.

Even more wonderfully, this is not just a once-for-all thing, just something that happened on Easter morning. This miraculous event impacts all reality. Ambrose understood that very well; “all our human pains and wounds, the Lord should heal by bearing them.” Sickness and suffering of all kinds are included in this message. They are not the end. Life is the end.

God, in Jesus Christ, has experienced all the hurt and injustice, difficulty and injury that could be visited upon him. He is with those who suffer. By his death and resurrection, he offers hope to a people seeking to find their way in a difficult world. Because Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead, he has destroyed death and made it possible for us to share in his risen life. And that is what we celebrate this morning. We have a share in Christ’s resurrection.

There is comfort in that message. We are the people who seek his hope. At this moment in our lives, with the difficulties we are experiencing, we draw strength from this truth of our faith. It is our hope because it speaks to us of life and of our future.

But, like Mary Magdalen and the disciples it does not happen for us just because we are here this morning. To believe in Jesus Christ involves our active choice to allow God into our lives. That is faith. It is a confession that we do not want to live alone. We acknowledge that God has created us, and has a plan for us, and a way of life. That way of life is shown to us by Jesus who invites us to follow him. To live like him is to live in charity. He calls us to “love one another.”

But this is not simply a statement of belief we profess once a year at Easter or when someone close to us dies. No, that statement of faith should make a difference in the way we live now. That is why we will shortly renew our baptismal promises. That will help us to be aware of the great possibilities that life lived with Christ presents us.

God has loved us. His Son has died for us, and, by rising from the dead, has made it possible for us to share in his resurrection. By so doing, he has shown us that Calvary and the sufferings and crosses in our lives are not the end. Life with Him in the love of the Father is our purpose and our goal.

The risen Jesus calls us now to live with one another with that same love. Archbishop Gomez, President of the Bishops’ Conference in the U.S., led us in a national prayer service for the healing of our nation from the ravages of this virus on Friday. It was a prayer to the Sacred Heart of Jesus on the day he died for us. The archbishop called us to follow Jesus, who “is inviting every one of us in the Church to take up our cross and to follow him along the path of humble love, the path of reverence for God and service to our neighbors.”

That same Jesus who carried his cross now rises from the dead to tell us that his love is stronger than death! He has passed through the valley of the shadow of death. And there is no evil that we should fear. He will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

We are mindful of all who are, in fact, sharing themselves in love in this time of pandemic. We are witnessing this in a beautiful way — in our hospitals and homes, in our parishes and ministries, in every quiet, unseen act of self-sacrifice and service in our families, and in our communities from the grocery store to the cemetery workers.

This is Easter lived each day

We are grateful. And the generosity we see reminds us that Jesus calls each of

us to live our faith in his Easter gift of life by the love we show each other.

And so, we pray that, in the joy of this day, in Jesus Christ, who is life, and the giver of life, we will find the strength to so live.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Let us rejoice and be glad!