

Easter Sunday

Cathedral Basilica of the Sacred Heart

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

We have just heard the beginning of the resurrection story – a narrative of shock, amazement and utter disorientation. One of the things that makes the stories of the first Easter so believable is just that sense of unexpectedness – the disciples don't come to the empty tomb and say, 'Well, there you go; just like he always said.' They arrive never having really believed that their Lord would return from death, and now they find themselves in a disturbing new world where anything is possible; and so bright is the light in this new morning that even the familiar face of Jesus becomes unrecognizable. But as the story goes on in John's gospel, we are told that the disciples anxiously gathered in their locked room were 'filled with joy' when they saw Jesus among them. They have been jolted out of the rut of what is usual and predictable – and joy springs on them without warning, like a tiger!

What was it like for those first few hours after the empty tomb had been found, after Mary Magdalene had delivered her breathless message? It must have been a period of alarming doubt, half hope, half terror. Who of us would really rejoice at the possibility of a miracle that would make us rethink most of what we had taken for granted? But into that chaos steps a figure before whose face 'the questions fade away. And joy arrives, irresistibly. The world is even more dangerous and strange than before; the future is now quite unimaginable; but there is nothing that can alter the sheer effect of that presence.

I find it striking that Easter is arguably the least commercialized of all the Christian holy days. Sure, there are lots of Easter bunnies, which, incongruously deliver eggs. But, as far as I know, no one was camping overnight outside of the local CVS or Walgreens for fear that the jelly beans might be sold out before they got their supply. I am not sure that the martyr, St. Valentine, would recognize his life and death in the run-up to February 14th, his feast day. The beer and booze barons pay a lot more attention to St. Patrick's Day and leave Easter alone.

Perhaps the message of Easter is not so easily domesticated as Christmas and the other feast days. There is something wild about Easter – a message that is untamed, difficult to watered down or manipulate for one's own purposes. It is a story that now spans nearly two millennia and features men and women who have been stunned by joy.

Christian joy, the joy of Easter, is also offered to the world not to guarantee a permanently happy society, – a society free from tension, pain or disappointment, but to affirm that whatever happens in an unpredictable world – sometimes wonderfully unpredictable, sometimes horribly capricious – there is a deeper level of reality, a new creation that is a sort of world within the world, where love and reconciliation are ceaselessly at work, a world with which contact can be made so that we are able to live honestly and courageously with the challenges constantly thrown at us. And on the first Easter morning, it is as if 'the

fountains of the great deep' are broken open, and we are allowed to see, like Peter and John at the empty tomb, into the darkness for a moment – and find our world turned upside down, joy made possible.

This joy is not simply the confident expectation of life after death, our deaths. If that is all Easter means, then Karl Marx was correct in condemning religious – especially Christianity – as the opiate of the people. What makes the joy of Easter resist domestication? The wounds. The scars. These keep our faith from being a naïve fantasy about “pie in the sky in the great By and By

The resurrection body of Jesus contained the scars from nail and spear, and these scars identified risen One to his followers. And yet, the wounds of Jesus took on new significance in light of his resurrection. While still reminders of the violence of crucifixion his wound-marked resurrection body demonstrates God's power over evil and death.

But his wounds reveal something else. God's work of resurrection—indeed God's new creation —begins in our wounded world. His resurrection is not a disembodied spiritual reality for life after the grave; it bears the marks of his wounded life here and now, yet with new significance. The Resurrection of Christ is central to our faith and gives profound value to what we do in this world.

The struggle for justice and mercy, the creation of beauty and the celebration of truth, acts of love and the creation of communities of kindness and forgiveness — all these all matter, and they matter forever. Take away the resurrection, and these things are important for the present but irrelevant for the future and hence not all that important after all even now. The vocation to holiness to the fully human life, reflecting the image of God, that is made possible by Jesus' victory on the cross and that is energized by the Spirit of the risen Jesus present within communities and persons.

Indeed, Paul's great exposition of the resurrection of Jesus in 1 Corinthians 15 ends by reminding the Corinthians, “Therefore, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.” The point of the resurrection is to demonstrate that cynicism, despair and death do not have the final word — either for human beings or for God's creation. God's last word is resurrection in the midst of our human, often-wounded lives now.

Earlier today Pope Francis celebrated Easter Sunday with thousands of pilgrims in St. Peter's. He asked them to return home repeating the words, “Christ is risen.” We can do no better in north Jersey. We no longer look for Jesus among the dead, in fairy tales or comforting fables, for Christ is risen, wounded yet glorious. Christ is risen, so our lives and the witness of our communities matter. Christ has risen, our joy is complete!