

He is Risen!

Homily for Easter Sunday 2018

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Peace be with you! What's the point of Easter? Simply put: Jesus rises from the dead. Jesus puts an end to death. He rises from death – a violent and tortuous death. In doing so he shows us a pathway to life, too.

Why is this so important? It's easy to forget the great innovation in human thought that came with this concept of resurrection from the dead. All along the historic Appian Way in Italy, travelers can see tombs with writings that express sentiments similar to this: "O Horatio, we miss you!" "O Catherina, where are you now?" "O Marcus, you are never to be seen again!"

"From the beginning, Christian faith in the resurrection has met with incomprehension and opposition," notes paragraph 996 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Then the Catechism goes on to cite the writings of St. Augustine: "On no point does the Christian faith encounter more opposition than on the resurrection of the body."

Indeed, even among Christian circles, there has been a certain tendency to domesticate the edginess of this central claim. Many simply see resurrection as a myth pointing to the cycle of nature and the renewal of life. Our cute Easter bunnies and the shoots of spring flowers all serve as mythic metaphors of "new life." The idea of a bodily resurrection from the dead simply does not square easily with our scientific world view.

Yet this is precisely the point of the scriptures. In the ancient world there were many theories of what would happen after death. The Old Testament proposes a number of them and in the New Testament we know that the Sadducees and the Pharisees differed on their opinions about life after death.

Our scriptures this Sunday report the unexpected. The bodily resurrection from the dead startled the woman at the empty tomb. It shocked the men who went back to their fishing only to encounter the Risen Christ on the shore, cooking fish. This bodily resurrection surprised the travelers who were leaving Jerusalem and going back to Emmaus. Thus, this "bodily" resurrection of Jesus from the dead not only challenges the world view of us so-called "moderns," it was equally challenging for those who lived at the time of Jesus. This is precisely why excitement leaps off the page of the Gospel accounts. The bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ breaks through all previous concepts and categories about life after death – those who lived at the time of Jesus – and ours today as well.

What does this mean for us now? Our second reading from St. Paul to the Colossians reminds us that there is more to life than what we can see. Thus, the words "Seek what is above." The

famous Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor in his weighty tome, "The Secular Age," describes so many of us as having a "buffered self."

What does he mean? He means that in a touch-and-drag, point-and-click world we tend to equate that which is real with that which we create. We tend to see realness only in what we control and put together. As a result, we tend to become "buffered" against anything that is transcendental and a bit beyond.

Yet within ourselves we also know that the stirrings of desire, our hope for love and its competing sense of loneliness all suggest that it's these hidden and unseen realities that are the most real parts of our human experience. Where do I come from? Who am I to be? What is my destiny? What endures after death? Often, we look to poetry, literature and art to bring meaning to these stirrings of the soul.

Christ's resurrection serves as the starkest evidence that there is more to life than we can see, that God is not simply one more object within our universe with whom we can choose to contend. No. The resurrection points to the foundation of the world, the source of life and the ground that – in the words of St. Paul – lives and moves and has its being.

As I close with these words of the noted poet and religious writer Christina Rossetti, I hope you will consider them a kind of response to the epitaphs along the Appian Way with which I opened my homily:

Words cannot utter
Christ his returning:
Mankind, keep jubilee
Strip off your mourning,
Crown you with garlands,
Set your lamps burning.

Speech is left speechless,
Set you to singing,
Fling your hearts open wide,
Set your bells ringing,
Christ the Chief Reaper
Comes, his sheaf bringing.

Earth wakes her song-birds,
Puts on her flowers,
Leads out lambkins,
Builds up her bowers:
This is man's spousal day,
Christ's day and ours.