Peace be with you! He is risen! This is the Easter cry. Yet note this. Nowhere in scriptures do we have an exact description of the direct event. Nowhere in scriptures do we have a precise account of the actual physical resurrection of Jesus.

What we do have is indirect descriptions. This Sunday we have the indirect evidence of an empty tomb. Next Sunday we have a bodily resurrected Jesus standing before the doubting Thomas. The following Sunday we hear about his physical appearance to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. But nowhere do we have a description of the actual resurrection event.

But what we do have is artwork often inspired by the words of St. Paul from whom we hear in these Easter liturgies. In our Easter Vigil reading, St. Paul speaks of how, submerged into the waters of baptism, we die with Christ so that rising out of the waters of baptism we can rise with Christ. Similarly, in his First Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul speaks of Jesus as the “first fruit” rising from the dead. This is precisely how we see the actual event of the resurrection depicted in scripture.

In Rome, the ancient 8th century Church of Santa Maria Antiqua has one of the earliest depictions of this rising of Jesus. It’s available for viewing on our diocesan Facebook page as well as our diocesan web page. The mosaic is badly damaged and cracked with age. But it shows the actual rising of Jesus stepping from the tomb. He tramples upon death personified: Hades. Hades, the Roman god of the underworld, also refers to the ancient prison house of Hades – an actual place in Rome. Jesus is in a tug-of-war with Hades. Hades is trying to pull Adam back down into the prison of death. But the stronger hand of Jesus is pulling Adam by the wrist out of death and into resurrected life.

Note the imagery of the Easter Vigil. Here at the Cathedral, those to be baptized descend into a baptismal font that is shaped like a tomb. Yet we – the body of Christ – pull them out of the baptismal waters and into new life. This is the artistry and this is the poetry that captures the deepest truth about our spiritual lives.

Jesus has physically and bodily risen from the death. At this liturgy through Word and Sacrament, Jesus pulls us by the wrist, inviting us to anticipate at the Eucharist the first fruits of our resurrected life. His rising allows us to rise with him at the end of time. Yet in speaking of how the dead rise, paragraph 1000 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church notes: “This ‘how’ exceeds our imagination and undertaking; it is accessible only by faith. Yet our participation in the Eucharist already gives us a foretaste of Christ’s transfiguration in our bodies.”
The “how” of the resurrection exceeds our imagination. It exceeded the imagination of the women at the tomb, of the doubting Thomas and of those unnamed travelers on the road to Emmaus. This why we turn to art. Even more it is why we gather again and again for Sunday Eucharist. We need help with our imagination, especially in the face of sorrow, suffering and death.

Perhaps in our quieter moments this Easter season we might want to reflect. Where have we experienced death: Was it the death of a loved one? Was it the death of a dream? Was it the death of a relationship? Was it the sense of death that comes from health failures? Was it the deadly fear of financial loss? Was it the death of a career? Was it the deadly fear of deportation?

In life there are no guarantees. The one guarantee central to the Easter promise is that Jesus is there. Jesus walks the road between our Emmaus and our Jerusalem. Jesus walks the rocky path of our lives as they are – not as we think they should be. There are no guarantees other than this great promise of the resurrection, the reality that Jesus accompanies us now in the shadow of death. As with Adam, Jesus pulls us forward by our wrists, inviting us at the Eucharist to his new and eternal life. Peace be with you!