

Homily: Easter Sunday  
(April 24, 2011)

*In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

This past week has been an emotional roller coaster. We began with shouts of “Hosanna” as we welcomed the King of Heaven to Jerusalem. We were transported to the Holy City to become part of the story of the Triumphal Entry.

It was easy to get caught up in the praise and wonder of the palms; to join our voice with the crowd. Enthusiasm is contagious. So we waved and sang, proclaiming to the world that this Jesus from Nazareth – this simple, plain and humble carpenter was – despite all appearances the King of kings, the Second person of the Holy Trinity, God incarnate, the one who was coming with great power, the one who’s recompense went before him.

But then Monday came, and Tuesday and Wednesday and the week drew on and things seemed to go back to normal. Routines kicked back in, there were tasks to be finished, meals to be made, kids to worry about, and projects to complete. And as the weekdays drew on, we were lulled into a sense of the ordinary. The extraordinary wasn’t happening.

I suspect it was the same for the people gathered along the road into Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday. Perhaps, like them we had different expectations for Jesus; desperately trying to convince ourselves that he was going to wave a mighty arm and dispel those who hurt us; overthrow the evil Romans, soothe the pain and magically erase the suffering. But we woke up this morning and we still ached.

Instead of erasing the pain Jesus chose instead to place himself within it. He willingly embraced it. On Maundy Thursday Our Lord held forth his body and his blood to be broken and shed. “Every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes.”

He told us that *they* would be the means by which evil and suffering would ultimately be conquered. And we weren't sure what to believe. How do we understand this? What do we do with this?

He then vividly portrayed how his disciples must behave in the face of that same evil – setting an example to be perpetuated – when during his Last Supper he knelt down and washed their feet, forever embodying his radical new commandment to love all people, even those who persecute us.

Love was to be their only weapon. Love was going to be the force that would conquer the enemies of life. Love as it allows itself to be bruised and beaten and killed for others, love which we call *agape*.

And these things were neat and different, but still we struggled to figure out how they applied to our situation. We struggled against the complacent lull that can overshadow Holy Week as we seek meaning for our lives in ambiguous and confusing words and symbols.

For some people however, their complacency was shattered on Maundy Thursday. For the family of a loved one whose funeral I was called to officiate there was no time for sentiment. Instead they were brutally pushed straight through to Good Friday and death.

There we were this small group of family and friends, gathered around trying to find the words to say “good-bye” to their loved one in the midst of Holy Week. Sounds

just like what the disciples went through that first Holy Week doesn't it? For both the family and the disciples the Passion of Christ was more vivid and real than for many of us. And the questions about who Christ is and what his death means were a stark challenge.

Holy Week would never again be merely a romanticized holiday. In the throes of raw grief they were forced into the story in a very real way; forced to walk with Christ to Calvary.

There would be no escaping the question of what they truly believed about this Jesus with whom we have walked this past week. There is no going through the motions. They could not get away with just reciting the same old words by rote, distant and detached from the powerful truth they convey. They had to figure out just what the actions and words of Our Lord's Passion meant in the face of life's realities.

We have to figure it out as well. That is what Holy Week invites each of us to do, every year. Not merely as an academic exercise but in a way where the truth of what we discover forever changes who we are and how we live. Real and tangible change!

So what did you figure out? What do the words and symbols and story mean to you? Did they carry you ever deeper into the Passion of Christ? Did they threaten you with meanings and conclusions about God and about yourself you would rather avoid or did they glance off of the protective walls we humans erect to keep others from seeing the real person who dwells within?

We all carry great pain and suffering around with us. Life can be pretty brutal and it has left bruises on our souls. We could choose to push it deeper down so as not to deal with it, but like the family at that funeral, the Spirit often has a way of bringing all the

pain we carry to the forefront of our hearts and in the light of Christ, asks us, “What do you truly believe?”

There is no escaping this confrontation with God. We can try and keep it academic and rational all we want, but at some point we are going to have to let our hearts be rent asunder if we are going to enter fully into the hope that has risen this morning.

By God’s mercy, unlike that grieving family on Holy Thursday, most of us are faced with a choice every year: Walk around the lake, or plunge into its dark depths. Bow the head and run quickly past Golgotha or stop and look.

I can tell you, unless we choose the latter – unless we confront the demons within and without that have swung the hammer down upon the nails and unless we confront the stark reality of suffering within ourselves and in our world – both that which we have caused and that which have ignored, along with the harsh truth of our brokenness – we will not fully experience the joy of this morning; the joy of the resurrection.

This is the joy of the new reality – that Christ has risen from the dead, has conquered death itself. Yes, death. He died, just like the rest of us who die. We don’t just pass on into a different phase of life as if bypassing the ugliness of death altogether, we die! And Christ died. Finito. Kaput. The End. Or so we thought. Though he was laid in the dust of the grave, three days later death itself died when Jesus rose from the dead. In the end, life triumphed over the grave.

This is what the resurrection means. Not that Jesus helps us sneak around death so as to avoid the inevitable. But that Jesus enters the inevitable and transforms it into the gate of life so that when we die, it serves also as the gate to new life. His life.

Now for those in the shallow end of rote, those simply going through the motions, for those fulfilling their duty – whether out of some sense of familial obligation or perhaps fear – this morning is a fleeting affair which is sentimental at best.

But for those who have allowed their hearts to be pierced by the nails – those who are the mourning, grieving, the pained and shamed and you who are the hurting and the lost. To those who are the hated and despised the weary and the worthless, who are sinners and not only know it, but admit it, to you today makes all the difference in the world.

For you Easter has changed you life for eternity. For you the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the joy of new life you could never have imagined. It is a gift you could not have hoped for, earned or will ever repay, just receive.

For millions of people gathered together around God's world, resurrection is more than a mental exercise, but truly it is the comfort of restored dignity, the balm of healing and the guiding light of homecoming. It is the worth the world has said you don't have, the grace you have been longing for and the forgiveness you dared not ask for.

Only three short days ago was death and destruction. The Lord of Glory gave himself into the hands of sinners and died and we thought our dreams shattered. Life would never be the same. Where there was supposed to be hope, nothing but despair remained. This was not what we expected when we said "I believe."

But in the slivers of dawn that rose this morning, a ray of light has shot over the horizon and pierced you clean through, sharper than any Roman nail ever created, sharper than any weapon of war and hatred that has ever been made by warring humanity.

Out of the grave of despair life sprung forth and has spilled into your soul. You cannot explain it but you can sense it. You cannot always put your finger on it, but it is there, undergirding all things. Every now and then you glimpse that life - sometimes your peripheral vision can see its trace in a stranger or friend, your ear catches its echo in the voice of one who is compassionate. Each time you do Christ pulls your heart closer into the radiance of his risen life where with the saints and angels and all the holy souls we forever praise the glory of God, the words which had faded returning to our lips: "Hosanna in highest. Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord."