

## **Easter Sunday (Apr. 16, 2006)**

Have you ever wondered what it would be like if Jesus had not been raised from the dead? St. Paul says our faith would be vain. Indeed there would be no Christian faith. We would not even be here. What, I wonder would we be doing instead?

It's only because his first followers had the experience of him alive and with them even after he had been crucified, it's only because they remembered what he had said and done, and passed their memories from generation to generation; it's only because of that, that we, too, can now remember what he said and did and rejoice with them and with one another in the wonder of God's extraordinary love.

We are fortunate, we who live in the northern hemisphere, because all of nature helps us to celebrate this great feast. Everything is coming back to life again. Bare branches bud with green leaves. Spring flowers blossom. The days grow longer and the sun grows warmer. And that is just a hint of the power of a good and gracious God who calls us all to life and to joy. Because that is what Easter is about. It is about life and joy.

It all began early in the morning on the first day of the week, by Jewish reckoning, three days after he had died. Mary Magdalene reports an empty tomb. Peter and the disciple Jesus loved run to the tomb to see for themselves. The disciple Jesus loved gets there first, perhaps because he is younger and spryer, but out of deference to Peter, not just older, but now their leader, he does not go into the tomb. He stands outside and looks in, and we are told he believed. He saw and he believed.

In the next chapter of John's Gospel we read that the disciples went from Jerusalem back to Galilee where it had all begun. Peter says, "I'm going fishing." They reply, "We'll go with you," and after they have been out all night and have caught nothing, suddenly they are aware of someone on the shore telling them to cast their nets on the right side for a catch of fish. They don't recognize him – all, that is, except the disciple Jesus loved. He says, "It is the Lord." It seems to me that it's because there is a special bond between Jesus and this disciple, the one Jesus loved, that he is the first to believe in the resurrection and the first to be able to recognize him through the early morning mist when he appears at the lake shore.

Something similar happens with Mary Magdalene. When Jesus appears to her she does not recognize him. She thinks he is the gardener. But Jesus simply calls her name, "Mary," and then she knows that it is he. Again there is a special love that makes it possible for these two to know him, to see through the early morning mist, through the tears, that it is Jesus, that he is alive.

At the parish I came from, Old St. Joseph's in Philadelphia, there was a park next to our church, and every year on Easter Sunday we had an Easter egg hunt for the children. Well, one year after the announcement was made about the hunt, one of the parishioners came to me and jokingly, I think, challenged me, saying we should not be playing up this secular image of Easter and contributing to the materialism that surrounds so many of our religious celebrations. I felt like telling him he sounded like the Grinch that stole Easter, but I managed to bite my tongue and laugh it off. But the fact is that eggs as well as that other ubiquitous Easter symbol, the bunny, are not purely secular. They do have a religious dimension as does all of the reality we live in, although it is not always evident. Gerard Manley Hopkins reminded us that the world is charged with the grandeur of God, but again it's not always evident, indeed sometimes exasperatingly well hidden. Both Easter eggs and the Easter bunny stand for life, don't they? Life comes from eggs, and not just for chickens, and in the case of the rabbit, that most prolific of all animals, it means life in abundance. And that indeed is what Easter is all about: life, and life in abundance.

But there is more to the Easter Egg Hunt. When the children went out, they went because of a promise, a promise that something was there for them to find, something that they knew they must search for and that would give them great joy when they found it. Well, that's what Easter is about as well. It's about a promise that something, someone, is there, someone, perhaps that we have to search for, a gift, a sheer gift of God, but once found that gift brings us great joy.

I don't know how much Easter joy Christians living in Afghanistan or Iraq or the Sudan will feel today, or in a month when our Orthodox brothers and sisters will celebrate Easter. Or in this country, the families of men and women killed or wounded or missing in this war. It may be difficult for them to think in terms of resurrection. In the land where Jesus lived and died and rose again, Christians are rejoicing today, but Israelis

and Palestinians still threaten one another. There doesn't seem much that you and I can do about these global situations – except, of course, to pray.

But in spite of that to bring the Easter spirit to life in a suffering world is very much our task right here and now. Closer to home there are the disheartened and the discouraged, the lonely, the house-bound and the elderly, the terminally ill, youth in need of credible role models, children simply in need of the basic necessities of life, the poor who people the barrios and favellas of the world and who walk the streets of Washington. In bringing hope to these people we also bring them life and that's the best way for all of us to experience the joy that God gave the whole world in raising Jesus from the dead. That's the best way for all of us to see through the tears and the early morning mists of our own lives that the Lord is there. He is with us.

This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad.