

Easter Sunday (undated)

A long time ago, in a homily on this Feast, St. Augustine said something that we have been repeating ever since. He said, “We are Easter people, and alleluia is our song.” In his homily he explained what he meant by that. At the risk of over simplifying St. Augustine he seems to me to be saying that we celebrate today not only the resurrection of Jesus, but our own as well. He is really only echoing what St. Paul tells us when he says, “We who have been baptized in Christ have died with him but we have also risen with him.” Now I agree wholeheartedly with both St. Paul and St. Augustine. I’m sure they would be very happy to hear that.

So what I would like to reflect about with you for a few minutes along with the resurrection of Jesus, is our own resurrection as well. What does it mean for us to be “Easter people”?

Let’s look first for a moment at those people we heard about in the Gospel passage from St. John. Surely the last thing Mary Magdalene, Peter, and the disciple Jesus loved expected to find was an empty tomb. Indeed I’m sure the thought did not even enter their minds. Oh, the evangelists tell us that Jesus spoke of his passion, death, and resurrection before they happened, but as John tells us, they did not yet understand the Scripture that he had to rise from the dead. And now here they were, discouraged, disappointed, even in despair. They had thought that he was the Messiah, but what good was a dead Messiah?

Well, what changed them? What made them Easter people? How did they experience their own resurrection? It seems obvious that it was personal experience of the risen Jesus. In the midst of their sorrow and grief, as they came together in small groups and tried to console one another for this enormous loss, suddenly there he was in their midst, astounding them, reassuring them, telling them to be at peace, everything was all right and they really had nothing to fear. Well, we live in a world that is so torn by violence that there seems to be a great deal to fear, and we don’t have the reassurance of Jesus standing in our midst as he did with the disciples, telling us not to be afraid. And yet we can experience his resurrection and ours as well. We can know what it means to be Easter

people. Consider for instance the disciple Jesus loved that we heard about in the Gospel story. Tradition has identified him with John the Apostle. We hear that he arrived first at the tomb, but out of deference to Peter, perhaps, he does not go in. Peter arrives, goes into the tomb, looks around, and is simply mystified. John goes into the tomb after Peter, and we read that he saw and he believed. He saw and he believed, He did not see anything more than Peter did and yet he believed. Consider another incident. In the next chapter of John's Gospel we hear that the disciples went from Jerusalem back to Galilee where it had all begun. Peter says, "I'm going fishing." The others 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 it is 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 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 and through the tears, that it is Jesus, that he is alive.

How do we experience the Resurrection? How do we experience the new life of Easter? Let me tell you about someone that I used to see at Old St. Joseph's in Philadelphia. He came to our outreach program for the homeless and poor. He would come for a meal and also for help in getting his life back together again. When I saw him I frequently asked, "How are you today, James?" And invariably he would reply, "Father, I woke up this morning and I said to God, "Thanks for letting me wake up alive. Thanks for the gift of another day." Now that man had slept on the street the night before. It seems to me it takes a great faith to be able to be grateful to God simply for the gift of life in his situation. But that is Easter faith. It was perhaps because of the volunteers who made it possible for him to come and get a good meal and some counseling that he could be so grateful.

That's a gift of love on their part. And that perhaps is one way at least that we experience Easter joy: in giving and receiving love. Like Jesus and the disciple he loved.

I don't know how much Easter joy Christians will feel in the land where Jesus lived, died, and rose since Israelis and Palestinians still threaten one another, and acts of violence occur on a daily basis. And Christians in Iraq will find it difficult to think in terms of life surrounded as they are by so much death. There doesn't seem to be much that you and I can do about these global situations – except, of course, 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 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.