

Easter Sunday, A – April 16, 2017 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.  
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – 8:30 and 11am Masses – 1,275 words

The disciples' initial experience of Easter was not characterized by the joy that now surrounds our celebration: we see in today's gospel, rather, the sentiments of panic and perplexity. Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb early in the morning, very likely to continue mourning the Lord's death, and much to her surprise the stone is rolled back. She doesn't look inside, but instead runs to tell the other disciples what she saw. She is in full panic mode. The response of the other disciples also is to run: they will not believe a claim such as hers so readily; they need to see for themselves. John is younger, so he gets there first, but out of respect for Peter he waits and lets him enter before him. Then John goes in, and the gospel tells us that "he saw and believed". What did he see and believe, but that the Lord was not there? In other words, he believed what Mary Magdalene had said. The result is that he, Peter, and Mary are all perplexed, as our gospel passage concluded: "They did not yet understand the Scripture, that he had to rise from the dead".

Christ himself had told the disciples on multiple occasions that he would be put to death and later rise from the dead. And it seems that this had become common knowledge, for the chief priests and the Pharisees themselves requested that Pontius Pilate secure the tomb after Jesus was buried, citing Jesus' own teaching, that he would rise on the third day. Beyond the clear prophecies that practically everyone knew about, Mary Magdalene, Peter, and John also found, when they entered the empty tomb, the burial cloths neatly folded up – cloths which would have been stuck to the body because of the burial spices and embalming, and which no thief would have taken the time and trouble to remove. Why was it, then, that they did not immediately understand what had happened? Why was it that "they did not yet understand the Scripture that he had to rise from the dead"?

We need to place ourselves in their shoes, accompanying them for a moment, as it were, in the midst of that panic and perplexity. What were they thinking? St. Augustine, commenting on this passage in the fourth century, suggested that the disciples had been so used to hearing parables from the Lord that they must have taken his prophecy of the resurrection precisely as a parable – in other words, they didn't take him literally, but supposed that he must have meant something else by it. The theory makes good sense, especially when we consider that the concept of "resurrection" would have been completely foreign. No one before had ever been resurrected: it was not a category of human experience. Sure, the Lord Jesus had miraculously raised various people from the dead – we think, for example, of Lazarus. But these happenings would have been known as extraordinary events; plus, those people would have to die again. The Lord, on the other hand, came back to life by his own power, and for ever.

Could it be that we find ourselves in a similar situation, wondering, in the end, what exactly "resurrection" is? We take it for granted, because of the revelation that has been handed down to us through the Church, which we accept by divine faith. But perhaps it isn't so difficult to relate to Mary Magdalene, Peter, and John in their panic and perplexity. Think about our own experience of death – maybe the death of a family member or friend. It is staggering, shocking: the one whom we love suddenly is gone, and a void remains. It seems so final; we can hardly imagine the person's coming back to life. We can understand, then, why the disciples were initially unsure, even in spite of what Jesus had prophesied, and what they saw at the empty tomb.

Ultimately, they did come to understand and believe firmly in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and begin preaching about it throughout the world, as we heard Peter doing in the first reading. They arrived at this conviction only after the Lord himself appeared to them several

times, talked with them, walked with them, touched them, ate with them, and in the case of Peter, forgave him. Over the next days and weeks of the Easter season we will hear about these resurrection appearances of the Lord. The disciples' panic and perplexity was transformed into happiness and joy: joy at having a personal encounter with the risen Christ, alive for evermore. When we hear their preaching in the Acts of the Apostles, we hear from those who once were in "panic mode", but gradually "put the pieces together" – made the connections – and finally internalized an event that at first seemed impossible, or at least too good to be true. If it seemed too good to be true, it was because they did not yet understand how great was the goodness of God.

In that great event, which we celebrate today, the good Lord created a new category of human experience, which we ourselves hope to participate in at the last day. But that will not happen unless we take the same path as our Lord did: there is no Easter Sunday without a Good Friday. When we think of Good Friday, we think of darkness, desolation, and evil, and it is easy enough to relate to these concepts, since our world is such a dark place today. But unlike that Friday on which Christ died, when it seemed as if the light had been snuffed out and darkness reigned in a final way, Christ has risen, and his light now shines in our world. Even in the darkest moments of our lives – even in the worst panic and perplexity that can befall us – the light of Christ flickers and beckons us onward. We must always keep our hearts fixed on him, and if we do so, we will never be alone. We will pass securely through the Friday of this world, to the Saturday of the tomb, to the Sunday of life eternal.

In order to keep our hearts fixed on the Lord it is important that we regularly renew the commitment that we first made to him through baptism. When we were baptized we received a pledge of the future resurrection of the body. We spiritually participated in Christ's death and resurrection. Baptism made us spiritually alive to God; and the Lord is so good that he gave us the sacrament of Confession also to restore that life whenever we subsequently lose it. And even though we still have to experience a physical death, if we do so spiritually alive to God, then our bodies will rise to eternal life on the last day.

So in just a moment we will renew those vows. We will once again reject Satan, and all his works, and all his empty show. We will profess our faith in God the Father, in Jesus Christ our risen Lord, in the Holy Spirit, in the holy Catholic Church, and in all that God has revealed and his Church teaches. May the risen Lord help us from this day forward to live out this commitment more fully. We understand the journey that Peter, John, and Mary Magdalene took, from disbelief, panic, and perplexity, to conviction and firm faith. We are beneficiaries of their eyewitness; but we wish to see it with our own eyes and experience it in our own bodies as well. My brothers and sisters: Jesus Christ is truly risen, and he beckons us to himself.