Easter 2016

Happy Easter everyone! He has truly risen, as He has said!

The great Feast we celebrate today is the reason we are Catholic and Christian: God sent his Son into the world for our salvation, and his death and resurrection change everything – the Paschal mystery frees us from sin, makes it possible for us to have a life-giving relationship with God, and opens up the way to eternal life.

If it is true that Easter is the heart of our faith, that is doubly true of the Easter Vigil. At Vigil we enter into the full story of salvation history, we initiate others into the mystery; the Vigil truly is the pinnacle of celebrating our faith. But of course, not every gets to the Easter Vigil; if they did, we would never be able to accommodate the numbers! So since the Vigil has so much to offer, but you are here Sunday morning, here is my Easter gift --- taking you to the Vigil. No, we aren’t going to repeat it this morning, but I will try to offer a little touch on many of the key elements in the first half of the Easter Vigil, the Lucenarium, or Liturgy of Light and the Liturgy of the Word.

We always begin (weather permitting) gathered outside around a new fire. We bless it, light the new Easter Candle, and process into the church. In candlelight, with everyone holding a candle lit from the one light of Christ, there is a solemn proclamation, the Exsultet. This ancient hymn sings of how God’s light has shone through the ages, reaching its greatest brilliance in the Paschal sacrifice of Christ. Then, in the Liturgy of the Word, we journey through salvation history through a series of readings.

First, we enter into the story of creation from Genesis. God saw that it was good. Earth and sky. Sun, moon and stars. Oceans teaming with life; fruit and flower, and all living creatures, great and small. Last night’s slides provided a beautiful sampling of the incredible things God created. And what we saw during that powerful reading from Genesis is just a small sampling of the wonder of creation. Then, God created the human family. You and me. Those we love, and those, well, not so much. But all, created in the image of God. How could it not be good? God found it very good. I have to agree. Whether walking in the countryside, traveling near or far, looking out at all of you every week at Mass. It is very good! I hope you have tasted the goodness, the gift. God invites us to see and celebrate the goodness, no matter how much havoc sin brings about. Creation is a gift and a covenant.

Next we heard about Abraham and the near sacrifice of Isaac. Yet central to the story: God provided the sheep for Abraham’s sacrifice, foreshadowing the even greater sacrifice to come. God provides the perfect sacrifice every time we offer the Eucharist at this altar.

We then moved to the book of Exodus, hearing and singing of how God led the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, to freedom. In our baptism, God leads us out of the grip of sin and death, into the freedom of a life of grace, lived in a loving, forgiving community. God shows us the path of life, God sets us free.

Lest we forget, Isaiah reminded us: God establishes a covenant of peace with us, calls us to refreshing waters, invites us to a feast.
A passage from Ezekiel provided a beautiful image: we are sprinkled with clean water, washed free of sin, given a new heart. I have felt it happen – the refreshment, the cleansing, the new heart beating inside. I hope you have too.

The Gloria then rang out with festive bells in accompaniment. Lights came up, and we let St. Paul teach us. Who else could so beautifully make the connection, draw the line from the old self, slave to sin, in need of redemption, to our baptism, when that old self is crucified, buried in the waters of baptism, that we can rise a new person, in union with Christ in the resurrection, now living for God in Christ Jesus. You know of course that St. Paul didn’t just write about living the Christian life. He helped people in Corinth, in Philippi, in Galatia and all around the Eastern Mediterranean to discover the new life, to support one another in that life, and to call others into community, into communion, into a life of grace. He still does that today, every time his letters come to life at Mass.

We listened, reflected, and sang our way through the ages, through salvation history. We entered into the discoveries about God’s love, from the first realization of creation as a gift to the gift of new creation every time someone approaches the baptismal font.

The readings came to a climax with the Gospel. I have no doubt that Mary Magdalen and the other women went to Jesus’s tomb heartbroken. I can just imagine them trying to figure out – through the tears, how will we ever roll back that huge stone, so that we can anoint his body? Then to see the stone rolled away, to see the angelic figure. “He has been raised, just as he told you.” How many times, to how many people do you think they repeated the experience?

Just as in the layout of those Vigil readings, going through God’s unfolding revelation to humankind lead up to the Paschal Mystery, so going to the empty tomb became a great prelude to Jesus’s disciples sharing about seeing Christ after his death, alive, risen; touching his resurrected & glorified body, sharing meals with him, being sent to proclaim the Good News.

This morning we heard from the Acts of the Apostles about those who experienced all Christ did in his earthly ministry, and who then were chosen to be witnesses to his resurrection.

To truly be able to proclaim the Good News, here is the secret, why the news is so good. The Vigil readings, our readings this morning, any Gospel reading proclaimed is not just a recitation of history. We don’t just listen to or re-enact things from long ago.

God is continuing to create this very minute, with every new star born in the universe, with every seed that breaks open, every blossom that blooms, every newborn baby that cries. God is still saying, it is good.

I know, there are many ugly things in our world. Jesus suffering, death and resurrection didn’t forever end all other human suffering. But it did bring redemption. It opened the way for all suffering to contribute to redemption, when brought to the cross, to the tomb, a sacrifice united with Christ’s sacrifice, preparing for the day when our tomb will be empty, and only eternal glory and joy will remain.
What about suffering? God has given us a precious gift: free will. Parents, wouldn’t you love to be able to prevent your children from being able to make disastrous choices, choices that cause pain and suffering to them, to those they love, even to you? But don’t you also know that controlling their entire life is not the answer? You have to set them free, even if that means learning from mistakes. Sometime awful mistakes.

So long as humans have the precious gift of free will, and really, how could a loving God deny us freedom? So long as we have free will, there will be sin and suffering in our world. Sometimes we and others will make loving, humble choices. But other times, we or others in our world will choose self-glorification over glorifying God. Some will acknowledge the true God, a God who says over and over through history: “do not be afraid. Love me, love your neighbor as yourself.” But others will choose fear and hate over trust and love. Sometimes we reject sin, and refuse to be mastered by evil, as we will shortly affirm. But other times we may fall for the empty promises of Satan.

But this Easter morning, and every time we celebrate the Eucharist, we celebrate God’s response to our fallen nature: Redemption! Sacrifice, love, mercy, forgiveness, resurrection and new life … these change everything. The great Paschal mystery.

As God did for Abraham, and fulfilled in Christ, God is still providing the sacrifice at hundreds of thousands of altars tonight, and also joining our sacrifices with Christ’s, filling our sacrifices with new possibility and meaning.

As in the Exodus, the Passover our Jewish sisters and brothers will soon celebrate, God is still leading people out of slavery, and there is hope for those in slavery this very minute, wherever they are, whatever kind of slavery.

The call to the water, and to the feast, found in Isaiah is ringing out this very moment.

That new heart Ezekiel speaks of is meant to beat in us.

The stone has been rolled away, the tomb is empty. Jesus has risen from the dead, just as he said.

But we don’t have to go to Galilee to experience him, to eat with him.

He will be the host, the sacrifice, the priest making the offering, giving us his body and blood in just moments, right here. We will eat with the Risen Lord. And then, the Lord will send us forth with Alleluias, because he has chosen us to be his witnesses.

Witnesses to share the Good News with our sisters and brothers. May we all come to ever deeper understanding and appreciation of the Good News, and be ever more ready to share the message of God’s love in the world, especially where mercy is needed the most.