

EASTER SUNDAY – April 24, 2011
Fr. Jerry Kopacek

Several years ago I read of a family who was watching “The Greatest Story Ever Told”, a movie about the life of Christ. One of the children was a seven-year-old who was deeply moved by the story; as Jesus was walking with the cross toward Calvary, tears rolled down her cheeks. She was absolutely silent until after Jesus had been placed in the tomb. Then, catching her parents’ eyes, she suddenly grinned and said “Now comes the good part!” Like that little girl and her family, we have during this past Holy Week remembered and relived the ups and downs, the peaks and valleys of the last few days of Jesus’ earthly life and work. Two days ago, on Good Friday, we experienced again the darkness and desolation of Golgotha. But today, we do indeed come to the ‘good part’—Jesus Christ is risen from the dead and has conquered once and for all the lasting power of sin, death and the devil. On this glorious feast, I wish all of you and all your loved ones a most blessed and happy Easter. It is truly a joy and privilege to celebrate with you the triumph of the risen Christ.

On Thursday night, at the Mass of the Lord’s Supper, I mentioned how the cold and snowy weather we had this past week may have made it feel more like Christmas in late December than Easter here in late April. In fact, there is a necessary and inseparable connection between Christmas and Easter: if Jesus had not died on the cross and risen from the dead, we would have no reason whatsoever to celebrate his birth. At Christmas, of course, we all enjoy giving and receiving gifts. And during these past few days, we have reflected on the gifts we have received through the Paschal Mystery: the sacraments (especially the Eucharist), our reconciliation with the Father through Jesus’ death on the cross, and the new life in and for the Church represented by those who were baptized and received into full communion with the Church last night at the Easter Vigil.

So on this Easter Sunday, what is the gift we have received through Jesus’ rising from the dead? In his homily for the Easter Vigil last year, Pope Benedict XVI had some very profound insights that are worthy of our attention and reflection and can help us answer that question. The pope talked about the ‘anguish’ we all experience when having to confront illness, pain and death in ourselves or in those we love. We fight against these things, especially death; we devote ourselves ever more vigorously to waging war on illness and death. We read, for example, of those wishing to place the seriously ill in a kind of suspended animation or frozen state so that, if a cure is found in the future, they could be revived and treated at that time. Whether or not this is mere science fiction, it does speak to our almost desperate battle against death. As the pope says, we try to convince ourselves that ‘surely the medicine of immortality must exist.’ And even though we know that is literally not possible, medicine and science still plug along—trying to cure this or that disease, to control the symptoms and to prolong life.

Now, on one hand there is a goodness and nobility in those works. Life, after all, is a great good and gift in itself that comes to us from God. We cling to it, and we do so naturally and instinctively—the very acts of breathing, eating and drinking testify to that fact. But then the Holy Father asks a most intriguing question: what would it really be like if we could truly prolong life and postpone death for, let us say, several hundred years—would we really want that? I would imagine that the makers of birthday cards and candles for birthday cakes would really like that, and we would probably have to completely rethink what we mean by ‘senior citizen’... And the economic and political implications would be staggering. You no doubt are hearing about the growing concerns regarding the financial stability of our nation’s social security system and other such programs with our aging population. If people lived much longer lives, just imagine the debates and fights in Congress about how to fund those programs. On second thought, let’s not imagine such things—it would not be a pretty sight!

Seriously, I do think about so many folks I have visited in the hospitals and nursing homes who have lived many years—approaching the century mark and even beyond in some cases—who are simply tired

and more than ready for the Lord to call them home. In other words, they know there has to be something more than this earthly existence. Two weeks ago, on the Fifth Sunday of Lent, we heard the story of Jesus performing a miracle in bringing his friend Lazarus back from the dead. Amazing as that was, however, Lazarus returned only to the same earthly life he had before. He would ultimately face death again later on—and this time definitively.

So we do indeed long for life; we do not want it to end, but that desire seems unattainable in our present state. It seems unattainable for the very good reason that **is** unattainable in our present state. And that is precisely where we return to the gift we receive on this Easter Sunday. Pope Benedict was right on target in saying that the cure, the solution we seek for suffering and death has to do more than simply prolong our present life indefinitely. He said: “The true cure for death must be different. . . It would have to transform our lives from within. It would need to create a new life within us, truly fit for eternity.”

That cure is real; it exists, it is true. That cure is the great and everlasting gift of Easter—it is Jesus Christ who himself rose bodily from the dead to that new and transformed life that will never again face death. In appearing to his disciples the risen Jesus could still be seen and touched by them, be in conversation with them, he could even eat a meal with them. But he was no longer limited by the laws of physical nature; recall, for example, how he appeared to the apostles in the upper room even though the doors were locked.

Every single one of us was made for life—life on this earth, to be sure, but even more we were made for eternity in heaven. That is why nothing in this world, not even another person who we love dearly, can bring us total and unconditional happiness, joy or peace in this life. We long for heaven, we yearn to be with God forever—and that is precisely how God has made us: with a hole in our heart that only God is big enough to fill. And today we receive the ultimate Christmas gift—what began at Bethlehem is now the gift of Easter: Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, the one who is and who gives us that hope for eternal joy.

With that gift, of course, comes the challenge and the responsibility to receive and live that gift daily. As Pope Benedict also said, “if we remain close to [the risen Christ], then we have life.” It is natural and fitting indeed to feel a closeness to the risen Jesus on this grand holy day of Easter. But what about next Sunday? and the Sunday after that? How will you conduct yourself at home, at work or in school tomorrow; what about the next time you experience conflict or anger or temptation of whatever kind? The gifts of Easter—the risen Christ and the gospel he entrusted to his apostles and Church—are not to be opened today only to be stuffed back in the closet and forgotten or ignored the other 364 days of the year.

Easter is all about gift: the gift of Jesus risen from the dead and the gift of his invitation to share in his risen life forever. The pope also reminded us that, in our baptism (the sacrament by which we are first united to the crucified and risen Lord): “a new life begins in us, a life that matures in faith and is not extinguished by the death of the old life, but is only then fully revealed.” May we gratefully acknowledge that gift and live that gift every day—the gift of the risen Lord who desires our love and our free and grateful embrace of his gospel.