

Easter Vigil Homily Dignity/Boston
April 11, 2020
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How good it is to see this community assembled for the joyful feast of Easter, although assembled as we have never been before, somewhat as a community in diaspora. We gather together around screens large or small, trusting that the power of faith will somehow infuse our isolation with a sense of connectedness, and that the reality and grace of word and sacrament will transform us from individuals, couples, families into living, breathing community that still has impact in a diseased and broken world. Thank you to the Liturgy Committee members and other community members who have done so much work to make these Holy Week liturgies possible, and for inviting me to co-preside along with Abdel tonight.

Jon mentioned this during the Holy Thursday liturgy, but I again want to note with gratitude that we are blessed by having recordings of last year's Triduum music. Many of you probably remember that Alice's health challenges meant that she could not enjoy our 2019 Holy Week liturgies in person, and Ron recorded them to enable her to experience them safely. Because of that gift, we have this glorious music, the sound of our own prayer, which, along with Kathy Ann's prayerful, beautiful dance, enliven our virtual liturgies this year, when experiencing liturgy in disparate places helps to keep everyone safe and well.

It is perhaps fitting that this year we are afflicted with the least satisfying, most un-Easterish of all the Easter Gospels. It is so unsatisfying that I believe we, along with many other communities, have actually substituted other Gospels in the past when we hit this cycle. I admit that I read quite a number of translations to try to find a version that actually spoke of Easter to me. Just listen to the ending of

the Gospel again: “Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.” This is not the proclamation of Easter victory my soul craves in these challenging times! We’ve just heard beautiful Scriptures representing centuries of stories of God’s intervention in human history, creating a world of beauty and bounty that nourishes body and soul, reassuring those in need that they are, in fact, being watched over and held by the Divine, even leading people to liberation and salvation. Then for the climax of our Easter celebration, we are offered petrified witnesses whose fear and bewilderment are so overwhelming they fail to take in the essential message of the resurrection! Where are the Apostolic women, the bold witnesses who announced the birth of the Christian movement? Who are these foremothers cowering in fear, too timid to speak the powerful miracle revealed to them by a figure sitting where they expected a corpse—“He has risen!” How are they examples of faith for us?

As we move ever deeper into corona crisis, perhaps this is indeed the Gospel that fits the times. As the Marcan account of the resurrection, this is the earliest, and perhaps the most accurate reflection of the historical moment. Perhaps we need to be reminded that embrace of resurrection was likely not an immediate response to a miracle so foundational to our faith that we’ve come to take a bit for granted. It probably took time, personal encounters with the risen Jesus, and community retellings of these encounters for Jesus’ first followers to accept and begin to proclaim Jesus’ triumph over crucifixion. Perhaps this Gospel is a helpful reflection on how destabilizing grief and loss can be—the grief and loss experienced by Jesus’ friends and disciples and the grief and loss we are experiencing this year at a global level.

This year’s Triduum forces us to wrestle with what a profound act of faith it takes to embrace and proclaim resurrection. On Thursday, Jon

reminded us that the re-membering we do during these liturgies is not simply an intellectual exercise, but involves our bodies and souls, as well. And last night, Alice used the words of prophet Mary Oliver to call us to allow our hearts to be broken open. The reality is that many of us are still in a Holy Saturday tomb, and many others remain at the foot of the Good Friday cross. In our region, we are approaching the darkest days of the pandemic's impact, as the number of deaths mount to staggering totals, and there is still much uncertainty about what lies ahead. Whether our particular current response to the covid-19 pandemic is anxiety, wrestling with the realities of profound isolation, fear about what our employment situation will be in the coming weeks or months, grief and anguish for loved ones suffering from the illness or on the front lines of response, I imagine that few of us are truly feeling the victory over death that Easter represents. The reality is that we are still living in the valley of the shadow of death, in a world that feels unfamiliar and unsafe, without the structure and social supports that have provided stability and sanity in "normal" times.

This situation is unprecedented for most of us, but in experiencing such a total disruption of the lives we knew, we join millions of people of all races, cultures, faiths, times and places who have undergone similarly disruptive traumas throughout history. Individuals, families, communities and entire cultures have been displaced by natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, famines, wildfires or volcanic eruptions, by human cruelty such as invasions, genocides, mass enslavements, imperialism, nuclear attacks, and intentional attempts to wipe out entire classes of people, such as the Holocaust. And yes, there have been pandemics and plagues that have decimated populations. And in most of these human tragedies, as in our current crisis, the poorest and darkest among us tend to suffer disproportionately, experiencing more loss of life, more displacement, more disruption of employment. And yes, we see our own community targeted. . We have felt the sting of those misguided religious leaders who have proclaimed

that the corona virus is God's retribution for acceptance of same-sex marriage or respect for transgender and non-binary people. In my work as a Board member of the Global Network of Rainbow Catholics, I have heard the stories from Eastern Europe, where LGBTI people are intentionally denied government-issued passes that assign them days to shop for groceries, and how members of the community are organizing to get their lists and shop for them. And stories from Africa, where business owners have been urged to fire LGBTI people first, putting our community in economic and social peril.

In the aftermath of every one of these calamities, the survivors have somehow found the strength to mourn their dead, to remember life in the "before" times, and then to move forward into the new, uncharted reality. They have found ways to survive, to adapt to unknown circumstances, to reject strategies that do not work, to reconfigure communities, to reinterpret rituals, and over time, to establish new norms. It may take a generation or more to see the total triumph of life over death, but the strength and grace of the human spirit, and the ways in which that divine spark of faith and hope deep within our species have enabled us to persist through so many different types of tragedy provides us with the confidence that we, too, will be resurrected in the aftermath of Covid-19.

As in the experience of the women who witnessed the empty tomb, I expect that we will experience Easter this year as a season, rather than as a singular event. Signs of new life will appear quietly, slowly, over the weeks and months ahead. There will be much to grieve, and much to question, especially for those who find themselves facing food or housing insecurity, job loss or economic cutbacks, the loss of loved ones, or other impacts from this pandemic.

As we emerge from the cocoons in which we have tried to find safety, we will find much has changed. We will need to draw on the resilience that has enabled us to thrive as LGBTQI people, as allies and

advocates, as people of faith in a church that tries to ignore, change, and silence us. And based upon our experience of this pandemic, we will need to rethink much about how our lives and our world are ordered. Moving forward, how do we use the earth's resources, following weeks of living with less? What will daily, weekly routines look like after learning to remain at home more often? What will be the lasting implications of experiencing how unjust it is to commodify what humans need for survival—food, shelter, medical care, education? What will we demand from our leaders and those claiming the title of public servant as we move forward? What has this period taught us about nurturing relationships and caring for those with few social supports? How will we honor those who provide essential services – everyone from grocery and pharmacy clerks to gas station attendants to letter carriers – whom we may have seen as functionaries rather than as fellow humans in the past? In short, what does a transformed future look like once we are raised up? There is much to consider and pray about in this Easter season.

In our trembling and our bewilderment, in our immersion in the stress of our current lives, in the anxiety about our present, our future, and our loved ones, we still dare to affirm resurrection. After a Lenten journey that has probably taken us where we could never have foreseen, after marking our Triduum liturgies with only virtual connection, and after being offered Good News that begins in grief and fear, we now begin the season of Easter opening ourselves to hope, to joy, to new life. Like the music we have due to Alice's illness, we will gain blessings from these dark and terrifying times. These blessings will lead us to proclaim—if not today, then someday soon, that Jesus is risen, and we arise with him. Let us affirm that willingness to believe with our "Alleluia!"

