

Easter Vigil, 2017
St. Athanasius Parish

“Do not be afraid! I know that you are seeking Jesus the crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised just as he said.Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him.'”

Over the last many years we have grown accustomed to celebrating the Easter Vigil at night ... after it is dark. Before the renewal of Vatican II, these ceremonies were done in the early, early morning of the Saturday before Easter, and done almost privately.

Over the last many years we have also grown accustomed to having people to baptize or complete their initiation into the Church through the Sacrament of Confirmation.

So you may wonder, why go through all of these ceremonies and rites when we have no one to baptize, and no one being confirmed? Would this not have been a year when the early morning Saturday ceremonies would have made some sense. How do I say this, isn't this a lot of fall-der-al for nothing?

I would say very clearly and strongly, I think not. We do these rituals as a parish because we need to know who we are, and we need to know what it is that we are called to be.

We are the people created by God and made stewards of the earth as in the story of
Genesis

We are people called as was Abraham, and provided for as also was Abraham and all the Israelite people. We heard these stories in our second Scripture from Genesis and the text from Exodus.

We are also the people who when thirsty can come to the Father, and in whom the Spirit of God has been placed: our stony hearts removed and hearts of compassion have been given to us.

We can forget all of this if we do not celebrate it, and ritualize it annually maybe we need to do it even more often. So with or without catechumens, people to baptize and receive into the Church, we observe this night of darkness to light, this night that moves us from death into resurrection and new life. It is really good that we are here!

Years ago, Catholics identified themselves as a people attached to the death of Jesus – the suffering of Jesus. We still do this. We most always have a crucified Jesus on our crosses ... we have an amazing one here in our church. It was almost in a sense, the more suffering we had to endure, the more holy we were becoming. This is not all bad, but we were overlooking an essential piece of Christian life. The Resurrection.

Then during the Scriptural renewal of the 1940s and 50s, we rediscovered the earlier and more faithful tradition, that “We are Easter people” and that “Alleluia” is to be our song.

This may sound a bit 'kitchy', even 'flip', but it is nonetheless theologically sound. Our trademark is joy and life, not suffering and sadness. Without the resurrection of Jesus we are nothing. We are the people who know how to take suffering and change it into something life-giving. We have been redeemed through great suffering; and so we can bring new life to others today through our suffering. Dying to myself – to my wishes, to my wants, and my weakness – we can bring new life, new freedom, new opportunities to others.

Because of Jesus' resurrection, what we experience and celebrate here tonight, all things are new. There still is sadness and there still is suffering and death. We may even feel overwhelmed by it given our world situation. Often we feel there is too much of these. And we don't deny them or run away from them. As Easter people we can look them in the eye, and even embrace them, because we know they no longer dominate. Because of Jesus' resurrection, joy and life are more powerful. Once again we have come through a period of Lent, with its almsgiving, fasting, and prayer. We have once again transformed the darkness into radiant light. Just look at this worship space!

But we need new eyes, and new hearts to understand and accept this – to accept that things are now different Today is Easter – and it conquers Good Friday. What is needed, my sisters and brothers, is Easter Faith.

Easter Faith is a belief and a trust that Jesus is alive – that the story we celebrate is not merely one of history like so many other stories – something that is over and done with. Easter faith is a belief and trust that Jesus is not simply a good man like Ghandi, King, even like St. Francis and others saints we admire – but that Jesus is present and alive to each of us this very moment. That Jesus lives with God at this moment, and that Jesus is actively involved with the salvation and destiny of each of us now. Actually involved with the salvation of the entire world.

Easter Faith is entirely different from let's say, Christmas Faith, Good Friday Faith. Christmas happened once; Good Friday was once, and never again. But Easter continues on – Jesus is alive today. He is active today. Easter Faith is different – it is faith in someone who has altered life and all existence. Changed it completely; upset it and turned it inside out and upside down!

How do we come to this Easter Faith? Some came to believe in the living Jesus by the Easter appearances of Jesus: we will be hearing of these in the Sunday's to come.

- coming to them in the upper room

- appearing to the two on the road to Emmaus

- appearing to the twelve on the shore of the lake

One came to believe in the risen Jesus by seeing the empty tomb

One eventually only by placing his hands in the wounds of Jesus.

Maybe some others by reflecting on the earlier teaching of the earthly Jesus.

But now the question: how do you, how do I, come to this Easter Faith?

Let me give you an example for myself, from right here in our parish.....

You may know that many of the current residents at Winding Creek Meadows are Catholic. It was not designed that way, but that is just how it is currently. But they do not simply live within the same facility; they are actually becoming a Christian community within that place. During Lent they met every Wednesday evening to discuss Resisting Happiness, and on Good Friday they gathered for the Stations of the Cross and maybe even to read the Passion of the Lord. This is self initiated. This is active discipleship in a way that fits them in their situation.

Another example is the group that Joanie Kessons continues to gather for socialability. Each month those who are single gather to go out for lunch. It is a wonderful act of gathering those who most of the week have a lot of alone time.

Of course, a couple of weeks ago you heard of those responding to the Parish Nurse Ministry's request to make prayer shawls and blankets for those dealing with special illnesses in our parish.

And in general there are those in this parish and in many other parishes who trust the Spirit's presence even in the midst of adversity
refuse to keep up with the envied "Jones" and raise their children to do the same
accept their own illnesses as opportunities to reveal God's love to others
quietly feed the hungry and share their own resources with great abandon and shape the next generation so they will do the same.

It is in these kinds of initiatives, and commitments to the Christian life, that I find my basis for Easter Faith. Jesus is alive, Jesus lives today.

I hope that you know yourself as an Easter person. One with Easter Faith. And that Alleluia can also be your song.