

Acts 10: 34a, 37-43

1 Corinthians 5: 6b-8

John 20: 1-9

On behalf of Fr. Linh, Deacon John, and the parish staff I want to wish all of you a happy and blessed Easter. Things are different this year but our prayers and support remain the same.

I welcome all of you to this Easter Sunday Mass. If you are a parishioner then I can't wait to see you again and I hope that you are well. If you attend another Catholic church (when we are not sheltered in place) then I welcome you—and I won't tell your pastor. If you are viewing us from another state or country then we are grateful for the internet that unites us across many miles. If you live in the neighborhood in particular on 18th or 19th Street, then “rejoice and be glad” because there is no one blocking your driveway! And if you are a non-Catholic or someone who just accidentally found us on the world wide web then I say welcome. We are glad you are here with us on this very special occasion.

Live streaming is not our forte. The Catholic Mass and all the Sacraments are tended to be experienced in person—and there is no substitute. To gather, to see, to smell, to touch, to hear, and to receive the Lord in the Mass is the closest we can come to our Savior on earth. So, we do this reluctantly and knowing that it doesn't achieve what we long for, but nevertheless we know that he is with us wherever we may be. And it is important for each of us to make time for him in our lives, especially under these conditions. So, I'm glad you've made time to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord with us this Easter morning at St. Francis. Your virtual presence is most appreciated.

Today I am going to speak to you about Easter hope. And I want to begin with a quote from one of our candidates, but first, I ask you to pray for all our catechumens and candidates because today would have been their first full day as full members of the Catholic Church but due to the coronavirus their initiation has been postponed until a later date. We are blessed with 25 men and women and several children who have completed their preparation and are eagerly awaiting the day of their initiation. My thoughts and prayers go out to each and every one of them. I know how disappointed they are to not be here today (or worse last night at what would have been the Easter Vigil). They have been looking forward to receiving the sacraments, especially the Eucharist for many months (and for some many years), but, of course, they are not alone. All of you would much rather be here in person in this church right now than in your homes and be able to receive our Lord—Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity—in the Eucharist.

We all are disappointed that this Easter we are separated from one another and Lent, though officially over, seems to continue as we accept the sacrifices that come with this pandemic. After the Chrism Mass last Tuesday, I texted one of our candidates and told

him how sad it was that only 8 priests along with the Archbishop were in attendance in the newly renovated Cathedral. Typically, the Cathedral is full for the Chrism Mass and we priests renew our priestly promises together and the Archbishop blesses and consecrates the sacred oils that are used in the sacraments throughout the year. The candidate agreed with me and lamented that it was disappointing but then he added this: “Father, God’s grace will see us through and the Lord will give us a renewed appreciation for the Mass, for our community, and for all the Sacraments.”

I was stunned and speechless. Remember this is from a person who isn’t a full member of the Catholic Church yet and hasn’t received the Eucharist or any of the other sacraments. And yet in a few words, he provided an example of Easter hope. Because Easter hope implies a transformation. It is not about going back to the way things used to be or restoring what once was. That is why Lent is 40 days in length—a long enough period time for us to be renewed and transformed through penance, fasting and works of charity. The resurrection moves us to something completely different and pulls us out of a former way of life and demands that we see and do things differently than we ever have done before.

In an ancient homily given on Holy Saturday the unknown author speaks these powerful words: *“Something strange is happening—there is a great silence on earth today, a great silence and stillness...God has died in the flesh and hell trembles with fear....He has gone in search for our first parents [Adam and Eve], as lost sheep...[and when he finds them he says,] I am your God, who for your sake have become your son. Out of love for you and for your descendants I now by my own authority command all who are held in bondage to come forth, all who are in darkness to be enlightened, all who are sleeping to arise. I order you, O sleeper, to awake. I did not create you to be held a prisoner in hell. Rise from the dead, for I am the life of the dead. Rise up, work of my hands, you who were created in my image. Rise, let us leave this place, for you are in me and I am in you; together we form only one person and we cannot be separated.”*

What a powerful image of God searching and rescuing Adam and Eve from their sin of disobedience. Raising them up from the bowels of hell and giving them a share in His divine life by acknowledging that nothing can separate Him from His creation. This is the resurrection. This is our Easter hope.

Easter is the culmination of everything we believe as Christians. Jesus who died on the cross has risen from the tomb. The virtue of Easter is hope because from the clutches of despair, abandonment and isolation Christ resurrects and reverses death. The traditional symbol of hope is an anchor, which I absolutely love. My dad was a Navy diver and served on a submarine and would often speak of his adventures at and under the sea. When a boat is on turbulent and choppy waters the anchor is cast to the bottom to fix onto something firm and unmoving so that it doesn’t get tossed about. Once the anchor is cast one can’t see where it will land or what it is attached to, but one must trust that it is holding the boat in place. In the same way, we cast our hope on Christ, the firm and

unmoving rock of our lives. We can't always see that our hope is well placed, sometimes we can't even see Christ at all, but we hope that He is there and that He will take care of us in our time of need.

But, of course, this is easier said than done. Hope, like all the virtues, lies in between two vices. The two opposing ends of the spectrum for hope are, on the one hand, PRESUMPTION (thinking that everything is covered so we don't really have to worry about it) and, on the other hand, DESPAIR (thinking that everything is lost and our hope is misplaced). Easter hope knows that what we experience here and now is imperfect and is subject to many questions, fears, and doubts. And that the human condition is susceptible to temptation, to storms and unpredictable pandemics. And that there are moments of darkness. But Easter hope also knows that there is something more to this life than what meets the eye. That we are made for something more. That light overcomes the darkness and eternal life conquers death. Because of the resurrection, we Christians can cast our anchor beyond the bounds of death into heaven, into eternity itself. What was lost has been found. What was dead has come to life. God has lifted us from sin and death by His mercy and given us hope in a new life that will never end.

Easter hope is our only path through this pandemic and indeed throughout our life in this fallen world. We cast our anchor into the depths of God's love and mercy and we trust that He is with us and that He will keep us firmly secured.

Like you I've had more time on my hands these days with less meetings and appointments and quite frankly more sleep. I started reading some of my favorite poets including Gerard Manley Hopkins and wouldn't you know, as if it was meant to be, I found a poem called "Easter Communion." Ironic, I know but I'd like to read it to you.

Easter Communion

By Gerard Manley Hopkins

Pure fasted faces draw unto this feast:
God comes all sweetness to your Lenten lips.
You striped in secret with breath-taking whips,
Those crookèd rough-scored chequers may be pieced
To crosses meant for Jesu's; you whom the East
With draught of thin and pursuant cold so nips,
Breathe Easter now; you sergèd fellowships,
You vigil-keepers with low flames decreased,
God shall o'er-brim the measures you have spent
With oil of gladness; for sackcloth and frieze
And the ever-fretting shirt of punishment
Give myrrhy-threaded gold folds of ease.
Your scarce-sheathed bones are weary of being bent:
Lo, God shall strengthen all the feeble knees.

My brothers and sisters, in the words of a not yet fully initiated member of the Church, “God’s grace will see us through and the Lord will give us a renewed appreciation for the Mass, for our community, and for all the Sacraments” if we but place our hope in His resurrection and we whose bones are weary of being bent let us bow down and trust in Him who strengthens our feeble knees...now and forever.

*Very Rev. William L. Novak, V.G.
April 12, 2020*