

“The Lord is Risen, he is risen indeed! Alleluia!”

Homily by Most Reverend John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo

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Easter Sunday
St. Mary's Cathedral

Just two short days ago, we were recalling with heavy hearts the death of Jesus on the cross. I can't imagine what that experience must have been like for those who were close to him, for Mary, and for Peter and the apostles, for Mary Magdalene. All their hopes were crushed as they watched him die. But this morning, their hopes, and our hopes, are restored. Today, in the first light of the morning, Jesus comes forth from the tomb alive once again. He bursts forth from the earth with a body that the earth cannot hold. Jesus had died on the cross for us, but he is risen, and will not die again.

When Jesus, the Son of God was born in our human nature, he bridged the gap that divided God from his people. Indeed, the mission of Jesus was to bring heaven to earth, to unite us with God once again. But in his resurrection, you could say that his mission changed course. By dying and rising from the dead, his mission was to bring earth to heaven. He was sent into the world not just to leave us as we were, but to bring us into God's holy presence. He came not just to extend our lives here on earth, but to establish for us an eternal life in heaven. He opened for us the gates of heaven and made it possible for us to enter in, to enter that realm that had been closed to us by our sin. Jesus shattered the wall of sin that kept us from God, and he truly does exactly what he came to do. In his own person, he brings earth to heaven, he brings us to heaven.

The resurrection of Jesus changes everything. The resurrection of Jesus is the linchpin of human existence. Every moment of history before led up to it, and every moment of history since is affected by it. With the resurrection of Jesus, life is worth living, no matter its heavy costs or burdens. Without the resurrection, life is meaningless, no matter its passing joys or triumphs. Easter is at the same time incomprehensible and simple. It is incomprehensible, beyond fathoming, that any person would rise from the dead and live forever. It is simple because that person was and is God.

The Gospel tells us of the empty tomb, the burial cloths left behind, the vision of angels, and the amazed story of the women. But to me, one of the best witnesses to the truth of the Resurrection of Jesus is the transformation of the apostles themselves. Just think about it. Before his time of suffering, they were unclear about what he intended, and they seemed slow to understand. He said he would rise from the dead, but no one really expected that to happen or even knew what he meant. In his agony in the garden, they fell asleep, and then when Jesus was arrested, they fled in fear. With the exception of John, they weren't even with him at the cross, and then they hid away in the upper room, terrified at what would happen to them. But then Jesus appears. He stands in their midst, and he says "Peace be with you." The apostles were completely transformed by their encounter with the Risen Jesus. They went from being a cowering bunch of fugitives to being fearless missionaries, true apostles sent into the world. Because they had experienced the resurrection of Jesus, they knew that nothing, not even death, could stop the growth of his Kingdom. They threw themselves into the mission that Jesus had given them, because he had died but now he lived. They even allowed themselves to be martyred; why, for a dead teacher? No, for their Lord, who had overcome death and promised that they would too. They had no more fear because Jesus was alive and would never die again.

It's that same Easter faith that draws us together here. Why are we Christians? Why are we here this morning? We are Christians because Jesus was raised from the dead! What does Easter mean for us? Easter means that there's hope for the dead. And if there's hope for the dead, then there's hope for the living too, for you and for me. As Pope Francis says: "Easter faith tells us that there are no situations which God cannot change, there is no sin which he cannot forgive if only we open ourselves to him."

Faith in the resurrection of Jesus says that there is a future for every human being. The cry for unending life which lies deep in the heart of every person is answered once and for all in the resurrection.

In this same Easter faith, we welcomed brothers and sisters last night to receive the sacraments that would join them to Christ and his Church. And with Easter faith, we too will renew our own baptismal promises, our personal profession of faith with the Church in the Risen Christ. We will also approach the altar to receive the glorious body and blood of our Lord in the Eucharist, because in fact, every celebration of the Mass is a celebration of our Lord's resurrection. If Jesus were not risen, none of this would make any sense, we would be wasting our time. But because Jesus is risen, because he lives and promises resurrection to us his people, we have just as much reason as the apostles had to throw ourselves into the arms of Christ and his Church. We have every reason to embrace the fullness of his Gospel and to live that faith in the world. Christ is our new life. He reveals us to ourselves, he reveals what our life must be like now that the reality of eternity breaks into it. The resurrection is a radical transformation into a new life, and Jesus is the first fruit of this transformation. My brothers and sisters, we are sent as his witnesses into the world, with the Good News of Easter on our lips and in our hearts: The Lord is Risen, he is risen indeed! Alleluia!