

Easter Vigil 2020

As we began our liturgy tonight the great hymn of Easter - the *Exsultet* - was proclaimed. Let heaven and earth rejoice! As we listened, we heard this summons: “let this holy building shake with joy, filled with the mighty voices of the peoples!” That is an arresting image! The Easter proclamation summons us to joy so deep and powerful that it bursts forth from our hearts to reverberate everywhere around us. The joy that is ours, the joy that inhabits us, is the joy of redemption. Jesus is risen! By the resurrection of Jesus Christ we have been set free from all that holds us in bondage, we have been forgiven our sins, we have been restored to life and have received the real hope of eternal life.

The vision of the *Exsultet* is to have our joyful acclamations make this holy building, this cathedral, shake with joy. Well, we know that will not happen tonight. Even though you rejoice in the Resurrection of Christ, you’re not here. This building is next to empty. But obviously, that’s not the real point of the exhortation. The announcement of the resurrection of Jesus Christ must reverberate far beyond the walls of any building into every corner of society and around the world so that hearts of people everywhere shake with joy.

This year it is especially urgent that the Easter proclamation resound far and wide, because everywhere we encounter a different kind of shaking, perhaps even in the lives of believers. People are shaking not with joy but fear. Something immensely powerful and beyond our full comprehension has taken place, and people are frightened.

Our situation is akin to experiencing an earthquake, by which the foundation of the earth itself shifts, things split apart and there is great destruction. What we are going through now with the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath is well captured by this image. The tectonic plates of health and the economy have shifted. In consequence, assumptions that formed the foundations of our lives have been weakened or, in many cases, have disintegrated entirely, causing hopes built upon them to crumble to dust. We shake with fear, not only because our lives have been shaken to their core, but also because it is not at all clear how their necessary reconstruction will look.

The Easter proclamation seeks to move us out of this fear toward the hope and joy that themselves cause us to shake. This movement can begin, even now, through a careful listening. We are listening daily to things that compound our fear - news about the virus and predictions of our economic future. Tonight let’s listen carefully instead to news that lessens fear and transforms it into joy. Let’s listen very carefully to the good news that is the Gospel.

The first thing we notice as we listen to the passage from St. Matthew is that the resurrection of Jesus is accompanied by a great earthquake. The soldiers saw this and shook with fear. But this event is meant to show that the resurrection of our Lord is itself an earthquake. It shifts the foundation of every human life, moving us at the core and shaking us to new awareness. The foundation of life is henceforward to be no longer self-reliance but trust in God. As this foundation sets deeply and solidly in our minds and hearts, then we shall happily allow the mercy of God to bring down the walls and barriers our self-centeredness have put up to separate us from God and from one another. In terms of our spiritual lives, the resurrection of Jesus so shakes us as to bring about a necessary destruction, out of which arises that beautiful

and indestructible edifice we call the Church, the communion of believers who establish their lives on Easter faith.

This is the faith that must solidify us as we deal with the pandemic and plan for the recovery. Things likely will look different than before, but our Easter faith enables us to face whatever lies ahead not with fear but hope. This is not just wishful thinking. It is grounded on the fact of the steadfast love of God who faithfully accompanies us through history.

God's faithfulness to us is precisely what jumps off the pages of the passages proclaimed this evening from Sacred Scripture. Listening to them is an act of what we can call holy hindsight. They take us back to the beginning and lead us through the many wondrous ways God accompanied and cared for His people, not failing to intervene in their struggles at moments God knew were the right ones. His decisive intervention is the one we celebrate tonight: the Resurrection of the Incarnate and Crucified Son of God. This holy hindsight announces the steadfast love and mercy of God as always present and perennially victorious over all evil. In this way, holy hindsight grounds hopeful foresight. We cannot see all that lies before us, but we are certain that in every event and circumstance our Risen Lord will be there, in the full power of his Resurrection, pouring out his love as he guides us, corrects us, forgives us and leads us through all of life's "earthquakes" to eternal life. It is no wonder that our Easter liturgies resound with "Alleluia!" Christ is truly Risen and with his people. We are not alone; never alone. Let this conviction banish all fear as we place our faith fully in our Risen Lord and surrender our lives to him. If anything causes us to shake, let it be the joy that inevitably arises in our hearts when we accept in faith that our all-powerful Risen Lord is always with us as he promised.

"Let this holy building shake with joy?" Well, I would be more than a little nervous if the stones and mortar of the cathedral started to shake. But I would be thrilled to see that holy building, which is God's people, shake with the joy of the redemption and allow that joy to reverberate everywhere. There is no more effective annunciation of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ than the witness of joy in the hearts and voices of his people. There is no more effective antidote to the fear, which should no longer cause us to tremble.

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St. Joseph's Basilica (Livestreamed)
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