

Day of all days: He lives, we are set free

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

April 5, 2015

*Easter Sunday
Cathedral of St. Mary
Fargo, ND*

“This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad.” This is indeed a day of joy, a day that only God could give us. Today is Easter, and with the astonished women and the dumbfounded apostles, we are amazed and overjoyed at the news we have received: the Lord is Risen! Tradition tells us, and we believe, that Jesus spent the time from his death to his resurrection with the righteous who had lived and died before the gates of heaven were opened. They waited and they longed during their lifetimes on earth for the Messiah, the Savior. Now, they waited and yearned for that moment when they could finally enter into heaven. Without Christ’s passion, death, and resurrection, they had no hope. But now their hope was fulfilled; imagine their joy! St. Augustine tells us there is “leaping and dancing” in the nether regions today. “He who created Adam has this day sought him out in the underworld, and by his own power has set him free.”

And we are like them, like those holy souls who awaited their redemption, who waited for a savior. Just like the early Christians, we spent the forty days of Lent and last night’s Vigil waiting, praying, reaching for the Holy One, the Light of the World, the Savior. And now we know that he lives, and like Adam we are set free! Faith in the resurrection of Jesus says that there is a future for every human person, a future full of hope.

If you could sum up the totality of our faith in one celebration, this celebration of Easter would be it. This is called the “Day of all days,” the most solemn of all holy feasts.” The night of death that followed our Lord’s crucifixion on Good Friday has given way to the brilliant light of eternal day, the day of resurrection. In the great Easter candle, we see an image of Christ risen, the Light who shatters the darkness of the tomb and triumphs over death and all sin. The Resurrection, the Risen Christ himself, is the cornerstone of our Christian faith. It is hope for a darkened world, and the pledge of our own future resurrection.

In a few moments, we who are already fully members of the Church will renew our baptismal promises. This is especially fitting at Easter, because baptism is the Easter sacrament. This renewal is more than just a pledge to live decently in obedience to the commandments. It is more than that; it is a renunciation of an old way of life, a rejection of the lure of evil and the mastery of sin. In place of the slavery of sin, we seek the freedom of the children of God, the freedom of those who are alive in Christ. In baptism, we die with Christ to sin and death, and we rise with him to holiness and new life. St. Paul tells us that by baptism we actually share in Christ’s death and resurrection. Baptism is like burying our sins at sea; it involves dying with Christ, dying to ourselves and our sins, and rising up out of the water made new, bearing in ourselves the imperishable divine life of the Trinity.

This Resurrection that we celebrate today is not just a distant reality, something out there, long ago and far away. The Resurrection is not just a past event that we admire from afar. On the contrary, through baptism the Resurrection is a present reality in which we live, here and now. It brings about a mysterious change in our very being, lifting us up above the limits and

bonds of this earthly life. Consider the profound transformation of Peter and Paul. Peter, who had denied Jesus, who had fled from the scene of his arrest and crucifixion, is now a fearless witness of his resurrection. In Acts we see him preaching to the multitudes that Christ is risen, and that everyone who believes in him has forgiveness of sins. And Paul, who was a fierce persecutor of the Church, is now like Peter, an apostle of the Risen Lord. He calls us to new life in the One who died and rose from the dead, and who will raise us along with him.

Through baptism, the risen Christ lives in me, abides in me, and will raise me up if I remain faithful to those baptismal promises and all that they entail. Of course, every gift brings with it responsibility. Jesus, who shares his risen life with us through baptism, calls us to live differently. Through the resurrection, ours is a new life, a new way of life. This new kind of life, a life of faith, worship, virtue and service, is expressed in the baptismal promises that each one of us has made. The Lord expects us to live up to those promises so that we may grow in his love, a love we hope one day to share fully in heaven. And he also expects us to be his witnesses, apostles of his resurrection. The only face that Christ now has to show is our own. It is up to us to show that he is now living, and that his love is still alive. We ourselves must be the proof to our contemporaries that Christ is risen.

Dear friends, Easter is the turning point of all history. It is never just a pleasant, little holiday, something easily forgotten. And it is more than just the external festivities of this day, the candles, and flowers, and all the rest. Easter is like a trumpet blast, a blazing spotlight reminding us that Jesus is risen, and we are redeemed in him. And therefore we must live as those who are redeemed. Easter must change us, lift us up, and unite us more fully every day with Christ. It is and must always be an immensely joyful celebration, and a kind of wake-up call for all those who call themselves Christian. St. Leo the Great tells us that Easter is the one day on which it is forbidden to be sad!

In his letter, the Joy of the Gospel, Pope Francis offers us this invitation, and I make it my own: "I invite all Christians everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ. No one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord... Whenever we take a step towards Jesus, we come to realize that he is already there, waiting for us with open arms." Jesus does indeed open his arms to us, and we see the marks of the nails left in his hands, enduring signs of his love, and a summons to faithfulness. More than anything else, this celebration of Easter is an encounter, a meeting with our Risen Lord, whose love for us never grows old, and who brings joy to our lives.

On behalf of my brother priests, deacons, and seminarians, I offer my warmest Easter greeting to all of you who are here, and I especially welcome those who are visiting. And on this day of all days, I invite all here to open our hearts as never before to the Risen Christ and to the joy of the Gospel. For we are an Easter people, and Alleluia is our song!