

Easter Vigil

4.11.20

Exodus 14:15-15:1; Matthew 28:1-10

AN EXPLOSION OF NEW LIFE

One of the priests from my religious order shared a story which he knew would someday find its way into his fellow Oblates' Easter homilies. Father Kevin flew from Wilmington, Delaware, to Philadelphia to preside at the baptism of some friends' new baby. The baby's name was Peter Jude and the baptism was very beautiful and moving – the baby appreciated the warm water of the sacramental font and didn't cry once. Unfortunately, Kevin couldn't stay too long at the family reception following the baptism because he had to immediately get back to Wilmington for a meeting. As he was in line at the airport security screening checkpoint, he was randomly selected by a rather stern TSA agent who promptly and thoroughly frisked him. You remember the routine they used a few years back. The agent dabbed your clothes and hands with something that looked like an oversized Band-aid. After the security agent placed the limp plastic sheet into a scanner, he soberly asked Kevin to step aside behind the steel machinery and was told that his hands showed evidence of a Class E-6 explosive.



At first a little shocked, then finding some humor in all this, Kevin explained to the agent that he was a Catholic priest and

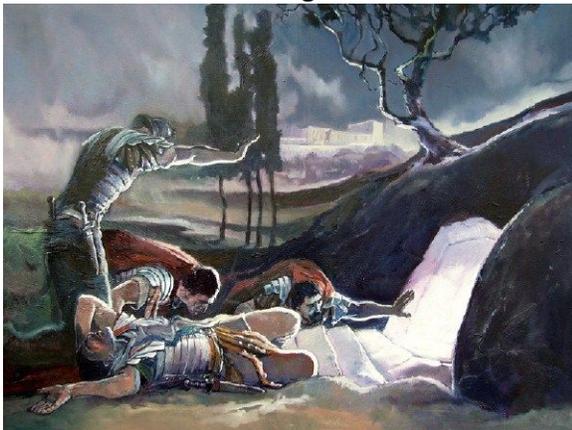
had just presided at a baptism ceremony that included a generous slathering of sacred chrism – olive oil mixed with sweet-smelling balsam -- on the crown of the baby's head. He suggested perhaps that's what was triggering the irregular reading. Without any humor, the agent asked him to remove parts of his clothing. More swabbing and further testing eventually showed that Kevin was not a threat to international safety, and he proceeded to Gate C-28, which, fortunately, was, next to a bar where he was able to enjoy a quick and much-appreciated gin and tonic to toast baby Peter Jude and his own safe passage through security.

Although the sacramental symbol of baptism proved to be a false alarm at the Philadelphia airport, we're mistaken if we think that our initiation into the life of Christ and the community of the Church is a tame and domesticated affair. This Easter faith which we celebrate -- our belief that Jesus is risen from the dead -- is explosive. If it weren't, how could that faith have motivated our patroness, a young woman named Perpetua, in the third century to stand up before the power of the state and profess her faith, refusing to worship the Roman emperor even though it meant her death in the gladiator's arena?



Or motivated Dorothy Day to open Catholic Worker houses in the 1930's during the Great Depression to give shelter to the homeless? Or motivated Franz Jägerstätter, a peasant farmer in Austria who, as a conscientious objector, refused to take the Hitler oath when he was conscripted into the Nazi army because of his Catholic conviction of the immorality of war? He was executed by guillotine in 1943.

There is a power at work in our faith that gives some among us the courage to face terminal illness with courage, others the willingness to forgive someone who betrayed you, the energy to work tirelessly for the good of your children, the enthusiasm to do your best at work, in school, in your home, the determination to stand against the crowd when you know they are headed in the wrong direction, the generosity to support your parish community by your prayer and with your time and treasure, your dedication to love others without counting the cost.



Did you listen carefully to the details of Matthew's account – *a great earthquake, an angel descending from heaven, a giant stone rolled back by a heavenly being who looks like lightning and who scares the pants off the big, burly guards who "became like dead men."* This is some power at work here and we're part of it. As St. Paul reminds us: *We were indeed buried with*

him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life.

In her book *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, author and poet Annie Dillard hints at the annoyance she feels when Christians fail to live out their baptismal commitment: *"On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning.*



It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return." This faith of ours isn't for weaklings.

I think that our present circumstances call each of us to heroic faith. We are being tested in ways that I don't think any of us could ever have foreseen. This is more than inconvenience or disruption of our daily routines. The coronavirus has demonstrated to us the randomness of life and the uncertainty of our human plans and endeavors. Life is not

always under our control. Bad things do happen to good people. For all the positive side effects that we talk about – the chance to slow down the pace of life, the gift of spending more time with the ones we love, the opportunity to connect with people in new and creative ways – nonetheless, there is a deadly virus that is still spreading, still wreaking havoc in the lives of millions, still threatening the compromised and the vulnerable, still eluding the medical and scientific expert's efforts to find a cure.

You and I are called to an heroic faith that will not succumb to fear or despair. Even though we can't be physically together to bolster one another by our communal prayer and presence, we are being asked to make our faith a real and active part of our personal and family living. The spirit of community reminds us that we are all in this together. The best and boldest news ever told: *"The tomb is empty! Death is undone! Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed!"*



That good news has not changed. But the world around us has. Or at least, the pain that always wracks our world has been freshly uncovered. What does it mean, after all, to celebrate resurrection when people near and far are dying by the thousands? What good can it do to insist that the tomb is empty when body bags are in short supply, mortuaries are at capacity, and mourners can't gather to bury their dead? Yes, we believe with all our hearts that Christ is risen, and that his rising was and is radically consequential. Yet, there is

so much about the resurrection that we don't know. What we *do* know — what we need to know — is that somehow, in an ancient tomb on a starry night, God worked in secret to bring life out of death. Somehow, in the utter darkness, God saved the world. May God grant you and me the courage to hold on through the darkness of this long night that has befallen us, trusting that God will bring us and our world into the light of day.



John Kasper, o.s.f.s