

Unbelievable Mercy: A Word for Easter 2016

What then shall we say? Shall we persist in sin that grace may abound? Of course not! How can we who died to sin yet live in it? Or are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 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.

For if we have grown into union with him through a death like his, we shall also be united with him in the resurrection. We know that our old self was crucified with him, so that our sinful body might be done away with, that we might no longer be in slavery to sin. For a dead person has been absolved from sin. If, then, we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. We know that Christ, raised from the dead, dies no more; death no longer has power over him. As to his death, he died to sin once and for all; as to his life, he lives for God. Consequently, you too must think of yourselves as [being] dead to sin and living for God in Christ Jesus.

Therefore, sin must not reign over your mortal bodies so that you obey their desires. And do not present the parts of your bodies to sin as weapons for wickedness, but present yourselves to God as raised from the dead to life and the parts of your bodies to God as weapons for righteousness. For sin is not to have any power over you, since you are not under the law but under grace (Romans 6:1-14).¹

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Both our parishes on the new calendar and our parishes on the old, together with our Church in Romania, have now entered into our yearly celebration of Pascha (Easter), that great and glorious time when Christians call to mind the mystery into which, as St. Paul reminds us above, each one of us has been baptized.

Or not. Perhaps Christians in our day and age do not call to mind anything at all.

One reason writing pastoral letters for the liturgical year is actually quite hard for me—and I hope you will forgive me for getting a little bit personal here—is that every time I find myself re-thinking life and faith, confronting an exceptionally acute existential or spiritual predicament in my life, a holiday comes around, and it is once again time for me, and all bishops and pastors, to share a word of instruction or encouragement. It is as if holidays always bring out spiritual quandaries on top of whatever seasonal moods, positive or negative, I may already be experiencing. But that is just the way it is: faith, although a divine gift, must show up on demand or it is not really faith. The problem arises when something that is not faith masquerades as faith.

¹ All scripture texts taken from *The New American Bible, Revised Edition*

And this is what I am thinking about this Pascha: the liturgy of the season exists as a kind of re-baptism for us, a chance to ponder more deeply what it is that our Christianity has gotten us into, to experience ever more powerfully the mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the mystery into which we ourselves have been totally immersed in baptism. However, sometimes I fear that Christians of all kinds and at every level of the Churches, official and otherwise, call to mind no mystery whatsoever, let alone the mystery St. Paul refers to in his letter to the Romans quoted above.

Sometimes it seems as though Pascha (the word means “crossing” or “passing over”) were loaded with celebration, with happy customs of every kind, with fanfare and with spectacle, for one reason and one reason only: so that we Christians can, practically speaking, *deny the reality of death*, in order to “pass over” this unpleasant subject without further consideration and without recognizing all the horror and despair that death implies for each member of the human race. Maybe I am only reflecting on my own experience and the movement of my own heart right now, but what if I am not? What if I am *not* the only person who gets depressed at the thought of death (and something tells me I’m not)?

On a purely human level, Christmas, as an example of another feast of the Church, has its own built-in, endearing human charm to distract one from the troubles of life. First, there’s the infant Jesus, the story of shepherds and kings, of angels and animals in the stable. On top of that, the holiday takes place during the darkest time of the year in the northern hemisphere, when people are depressed anyway and very naturally turn to one another in our shared need for light, warmth and companionship. Thus Christians, whether everyday pew-warmers or “Christian CEO’s” (i.e., those who attend church services only on Christmas, Easter, and Occasions such as weddings and funerals), are indeed able to appreciate the truth of the feast of Christmas, a thousand pulpit-rants notwithstanding. We *do* recognize that God has loved us enough to become one of us, and that is something we rejoice in almost effortlessly.

Perhaps what is true for Christmas, though, is just not the case for Easter, and for the simple reason that Easter deals with another aspect of life altogether. Consider this: unless a person is already dead, it is a dead certainty that he or she is getting older every second. Our lives are a constant march to the grave. In dealing with this unavoidable and undeniable outcome, the songs and slogans that may have comforted us in the past might not be adequate to the experience of our life in the season of it in which we find ourselves today. *Meanings change*. Yesterday’s comforts might be the cause of today’s confusion if we give ourselves permission to reflect on them from the perspective of this year rather than last. It is so easy for dogma to begin to resemble denial as one matures, and self-deception might be the stance we finally assume for ourselves because we simply cannot endure the evidence of our senses when it comes to death.

Here in Canton, at the chancery, I’ve been engaged in a kind of standing joke with chancery staff. Younger members of the staff have been using a term that seems to have become quite current in business circles these days: to “reach out.” Now, in *my* day “reach out” meant to extend oneself, to offer sympathy and support to someone in need, to

connect on an emotional level with another person. Nowadays it seems to mean simply to contact another person. (Those of us who are old enough to remember such things as “long-distance” will remember AT&T’s campaign urging its customers to “reach out and touch someone,” not to mention songs like the Four Tops’ *Reach Out I’ll Be There*, which, I am pretty certain, had nothing to do with text messages or email.)

It all goes to show how just much meanings can change, and over relatively short periods of time—the song appeared “only” fifty years ago, in 1966. It is not simply a matter of words changing connotation over time; the way we individually and collectively interpret experience is in a state of constant change. Everything is subject to revision and second thought. Yesterday’s certainties have become today’s mythologies, and what we take for granted as true today will become tomorrow’s nostalgic fairy tale.

Amid all the shouts of victory, of “Christ is risen” and “death has been conquered,” moreover amid all the new spring outfits, the friendly greetings—not to mention the food!—one gets the sense that everyone in the Church is really hedging their bets. What we now celebrate is fundamental to us. It is the mystery we have been baptized into, and all the liturgy and powerful symbolic language of the Church at Great Lent and Easter is designed to do one thing in the context of that mystery: *bring us to an awareness of death and what God is doing about it today*. For our part, however, we simply do not wish to think about it, not even at Easter, thank you very much.

Death is just too dreadful to give it serious thought if we don’t have to. It’s too depressing, and that makes it too un-American. After all, our culture provides abundant evidence of the lengths and expense to which we will go to make up for the fact that we cannot cope with death, and that we would much prefer instead to pretend that death is not the horrible, destructive phenomenon that it is.

We do all that we can to keep from confronting the reality of death, including celebrating Easter as we do. It is not that the feast itself, or indeed the liturgy of the feast, are meant to enable Christians to engage in mass denial and self-deception—far from it! But that does not mean we can’t *use*, or rather *misuse* our celebration for that purpose. We do misuse the holiday, even without intending to do so.

When our attempt, unconscious as it may be, to misuse the holiday goes wrong; when, in spite of our best efforts, denial breaks down and we become sad, listless, or depressed during the holiday season, we tend to conclude that it is someone or something else’s fault: an unpleasant family situation, a downturn in the job market, the unwanted attention of an enemy or someone who desires our harm—maybe God Himself! At a deeper level, one may fear it is really one’s own fault, that there is “something wrong with me,” and that not even God can stand me. There goes God again, running away from me right when I’m in trouble!

*How long, Lord? Will you utterly forget me?
 How long will you hide your face from me?
 How long must I carry sorrow in my soul,
 grief in my heart day after day?
 How long will my enemy triumph over me? (Psalm 13:1-2)*

If you can, consider an even more horrifying thought: *does the fact of my impending death mean that there is no God, or, if there is, that God loves me less than the people who will grieve my passing?* If there is no God, or if the universe somehow does not grieve, or even notice, my passing, does that not mean that, in the end, it is evil and death that have won the battle for the universe, and not life and love, goodness, beauty, and truth? What about my own being, my own soul? If I die—correction: *when I die*, who or what wins? *And is what I have always believed adequate to the reality I am experiencing today?*

*Look upon me, answer me, Lord, my God!
 Give light to my eyes lest I sleep in death,
 Lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed,"
 lest my foes rejoice at my downfall. (Psalm 13:3-4)*

For forty days, the time of Great Lent, we have been asked to fast, to give alms, and to pray in an especially intense manner in order to sharpen our perception and render our hearts and minds more open to God and to each other, our fellow mortals. In the pageantry of Holy Week services, impressive as they are in their exquisite poetry, music, and solemnity, especially when the services are done well with attentive, capable clergy and an enthusiastic congregation, we have every opportunity to dwell on and absorb—body, mind, and spirit—all the truth of God and of ourselves that we can handle. The trouble is (with apologies to Jack Nicholson) *we can't handle the truth*.

Life is, after all, a big deal. We only get one life, and for all we can tell, it is not permanent. Once we are gone, we don't come back. All sales are final. Returns and exchanges are not allowed. The frightening and dreadful seriousness of existence, a topic I have dwelt upon more than once in these letters, tends to turn our hearts cold and send us scurrying for emotional cover in the form of escapes of every kind—work, entertainment, politics, religion—all the things we refer to as the "serious business" of life, but which, in fact, often do nothing more than help us avert our gaze and construct the two-dimensional stage scenery within which we act out our personal dramas.

The problem is compounded because religious leaders, spiritual teachers, and others to whom we turn in order to help us to make sense of, and meaningfully live out, our one existence are no less subject to paralysis and denial than anyone else, and I include myself in this number. The mystery of my own life sometimes leaves me speechless, and though called and ordained to preach Good News, to give comfort and care to the perplexed and overwhelmed among those entrusted to me by the Church, I do not want to reduce my service to providing platitudes, "recipes," and pre-recorded pronouncements of "truths"

from my personal well of wisdom—a particularly troublesome and common fault of the clergy for millennia:

*Small and great alike, all are greedy for gain;
prophet and priest, all practice fraud.
They have treated lightly
the injury to my people:
“Peace, peace!” they say,
though there is no peace.
They have acted shamefully, committing abominations,
yet they are not at all ashamed,
they do not know how to blush (Jeremiah 6:13-15)*

Unlike the prophet and priest Jeremiah condemns, I, as a priest, do not want to practice fraud, at least not deliberately. A preacher is accountable to the word he preaches, and I do not want to minimize the injury to God’s people that evil and death, in all their manifestations, have done. Honesty, at such times, causes me to blush, makes me really just want to shut my mouth.

And yet:

*A voice says, “Proclaim!”
I answer, “What shall I proclaim?”
“All flesh is grass,
and all their loyalty like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower wilts,
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it.” (Isaiah 40:6-7)*

Now, I’ll bet you’re thinking, “But Easter isn’t supposed to be depressing! It is supposed to be uplifting! The Resurrection of Christ is the source of our hope, isn’t it? This feast is all about victory, about Christ’s victory over sin and death! Why are you being such a spoilsport? Christ is risen! Let’s eat! It’s a feast, a banquet!”

And indeed it is!! This year, above all other years, it is critical that we understand just how grand and glorious a feast Easter is: this is the Jubilee Year of Mercy, and one of God’s biggest problems seems to be to convince us just how wide and deep and lavish His mercy is. Easter is nothing else if not a feast of mercy.

*“Yes, the people is grass!
The grass withers, the flower wilts,
but the word of our God stands forever.” (Isaiah 40:7-8)*

In contrast to “all flesh,” it is the Word of God, says the Prophet Isaiah, that stands forever. For us Christians, Jesus Christ Himself is that Word of God (John 1:1), and it is He, and He alone, who is the object of our hope and the very face of Divine Mercy, for from now

on Divine Mercy has a human face. Jesus Christ, who died, now lives! And it is to Him that we turn for not only the answers to our questions, but also the solutions to our problems—or, should I say, our *problem* of death.

A relationship with Jesus Christ, just like a relationship with a spouse, is not some kind of hocus-pocus reality that exists only because one says it does, nor is it a matter of saying the right words when asked (“Do you really love me?” “Is Jesus your personal savior?”). The consistent witness of the Church from the New Testament onward is that all people are invited to a *personal encounter with Jesus Christ*, a living, breathing man who is also God and who rose from the tomb after suffering a very real and a very painful death—while forgiving his torturers and executioners (Luke 23:34). And this encounter takes place in the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth.

The Jubilee Year of Mercy, proclaimed by Pope Francis and celebrated throughout the Church this year, provides the backdrop against which we can see what is really going on in the Christian world. You see, it is the very lack of mercy on the part of Christians that is the most powerful evidence there is that, in fact, *Christians do not believe the Good News*. It is not possible to have a real, personal encounter with a man who taught his followers to love their enemies and at the same time insist that one is doing what that Man teaches when one is killing and maiming one’s enemies and starving and shutting out the stranger. To put it bluntly, violence on the part of Christians, whether the direct violence of making war or the less direct violence often involved in making a profit, stands as a powerful anti-witness to the Word of God. It makes it easy for non-believers to reject Jesus and His teaching when they see believers claiming to accept the person of Jesus while rejecting His message.

And it makes it awfully hard for believers themselves to continue to believe, especially when all the symbolic power of the Church finds itself at the service of denial and self-deception, while nothing is done to address the massive pastoral problem such self-deception represents in and to the Church. To be sure, Christian faith is not easy. In fact, it is impossible, but for the grace of God. But seldom is any mention made of the fact that the hardest thing a Christian does, at least in our world, is *to keep believing, trusting, hoping, and loving*.

Life not only has problems, it *is* a problem. Christians gather at Pascha to celebrate our crossing over from death to life, but the death we are crossing over from, and the life we are crossing over to, are not what we think they are. Jesus rose...but He had to die in order to do that. And the permanent, everlasting life He now lives, He lives for God. Sin killed Him, and thus He died to sin. St. Paul says:

Consequently, you too must think of yourselves as [being] dead to sin and living for God in Christ Jesus. Therefore, sin must not reign over your mortal bodies so that you obey their desires. And do not present the parts of your bodies to sin as weapons for wickedness, but present yourselves to God as raised from the dead to life and the parts of your bodies to God as weapons for righteousness. For sin is not to have any power over you, since you are not under the law but under grace. (Romans 6:11-14)

What God has done about death has nothing to do with the physical survival we impossibly long for. When God closed the Garden of Eden, He did so for good. The garden now open to us now is the Garden of Gethsemane. And in place of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, whose fruit was death, God has planted the life-giving tree of the Cross. Noted spiritual writer Evelyn Underhill observes:

To look at the Crucifix and then to look at our own hearts; to test by the cross the quality of our love—if we do that honestly and unflinchingly we don't need any other self-examination...It is no use to talk in a large vague way about the love of God; here is its point of insertion in the world.²

I have said that Christian faith is not easy, and that it is a gift of God—a grace. The practical unbelief of Christians for generations, professing belief in the person of Jesus Christ while simultaneously not believing His teaching of nonviolent, active love of friend and enemy, has not made belief any easier, either, in the sense that the testimony of Christians in such circumstances is frightfully unclear and contradictory. And it is true that it is this testimony, particularly the written witness of Holy Scripture, that the Church relies on in passing on the Good News. But something more seems to be required of us for our testimony to have power and authenticity in our day.

In John's Gospel we read: *"But these are written that you may [come to] believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name,"* (John 20:31). Interestingly, in its notes to this verse, the *New American Bible, Revised Edition* observes:

While many manuscripts read "come to believe," possibly implying a missionary purpose for John's gospel, a small number of quite early ones read "continue to believe," suggesting that the audience consists of Christians whose faith is to be deepened by the book; cf. Jn 19:35. (John 20:30 NABre Notes)

Thus one may conclude that, if faith in the risen Lord is difficult now, it was not particularly easy in Apostolic times, either. All we need to do is read the story of the Apostle Thomas in John 20:19-29 for the first example of that. I find it fascinating that at the end of the day, on the very evening of Easter Sunday, after all the liturgizing and celebrating and feasting, the Church gathers once more (or ought to) for the celebration of the service known as Agape (or "love") Vespers. During that service, the gospel reading (John 20:19-25) tells of the joy of the disciples that first Easter evening, when the risen Jesus appeared to them, despite their hiding out behind doors they had locked in their terror. He greets them with "Peace be to you," and proceeds to show them his mortal wounds, at which the disciples rejoice. But Thomas is not there, and the gospel reading for the service ends with Thomas arriving later and declaring: "Unless I see the mark of the

² Quoted in *Bread and Wine: Readings for Lent and Easter* (Plough Publishing, 2003), p. 199.

nails in his hands and put my finger into the nailmarks and put my hand into his side, *I will not believe,*" (John 20:25).

Now, I ask you: is that any way to end the day on Easter Sunday? Is that the note of uplifting hope that the Church would leave us with at sundown on the "Day Without End?" Perhaps it is if, even in its earliest days, the Church took seriously the challenge to faith and reason posed by its proclamation of the resurrection.

What we proclaim at Easter is **not** "Christ is risen" and life goes on, or "Christ is risen" but nothing has changed, or "Christ is risen," but death still has the last word. No. What we proclaim is "Christ is risen," and *the human condition itself has changed*, permanently. When we offer one another our traditional Easter greetings, which we often rather uninspiringly render in English as "Christ is risen" and "Truly He is risen," we would do well instead to imagine ourselves as the overjoyed disciples trying to convince Thomas of what they had seen:

Disciple: "Jesus is risen, Thomas! He was here! We saw him!"

Thomas: "You're joking, right?"

Disciple: "No, I mean it! I'm serious; He really is risen!"

Thomas: "Yeah, well, if all I have to go on is your word, and don't get to see him myself, *I will not believe.*"

A week goes by, and we know how this story ends: Jesus appears once again to the disciples, and this time Thomas is there. What does Jesus do? Does He "smite" him for not believing? Does He criticize Thomas' less-than-perfect trust? Does He reproach him or have him thrown out of the group of disciples?

What Jesus does is invite Thomas to reach out and touch his wounds. He calls Thomas in to a more intimate and personal relationship. He *provides proof* of a new reality for Thomas and blesses all of us "who have not seen and have believed," (John 20:29). No less than Thomas, we ourselves are invited into an intimate relationship in which the proofs of love and of life are provided. The possibility of a *real, living relationship with Jesus Christ* is what keeps the Gospel from becoming a mere recipe, a pious fable, or a preacher's fraud. In the Holy Spirit, we are able to partake of Christ's own resurrection, His own life, and not simply rely on the word of another. He walks right through our locked doors and says "touch me and believe that I love you!"

But where in the world will people see the Risen Jesus if the Christians who are His body will not allow themselves to be wounded, if their idea of "conquering death by death" amounts to "get 'em before they get you?"

*Christ said to Thomas, "Probe as much as you wish; put your hand into My side and know Me, that I have real flesh, bones and body. Do not persist in your unbelief, but believe as the rest do." And Thomas shouted, "Glory to Your holy Resurrection, O You who are my Lord and my God!"*³

Because of the resurrection, every human life now has a new context in which to deal realistically with death. Pascha, far from enabling us to deny the reality of our inevitable death, is the reminder that Christ took to the cross out of love for every loser who ever lived, lives now, and ever will live, even you and me. Christ ascended the cross to be wounded with us, to die with us, to make us the recipients of an unbelievable mercy that knows no bounds and has no limits. He showed his living wounds to his disciples—and to us—to prove that He is no ghost, but a real, living human being, and He insists that it is absolutely OK for us to probe, to question, to reach our own fingers out to Him amid doubt and fear. He, live and in person, bestows life to us who are in the tombs of misery, violence, and despair, and He conquers our death by dying out of love for each one of us.

But this has profound, practical implications for every one of us. Christ did not die—and rise—so that we might remain in our sin, that is, our self-deception and our denial of reality. He died—and rose—so that we can be convinced that our *survival is not something to be concerned about*. To put it another way, the Christian can love because the Christian knows he or she is *already dead*. Sin has already killed us. And that means that the Christian knows he or she is also already alive—risen—in a new and unexplainable life that belongs to God. As God, for love, has lived out of our mortality, He invites us to a life lived in His immortality.

Because the Christian belongs to God, because he or she is baptized into that mystery of being dead with Christ and alive with Him as well, the Christian can no longer be a “weapon for wickedness.” One who is already dead has no need to kill. Christ rose from His tomb so that those who believe in him, who trust in him, who *know him personally*, can escape from the tombs of our own fears, our own denial, our own preoccupation with what is passing as if it were permanent.

This is a hard truth we would rather turn our eyes away from. But it is the only truth that amounts to Good News. We can and no doubt will continue to prefer to save ourselves, to try to provide for ourselves the one thing that is clearly outside our capacity: immortality. But it does not matter, however, because **Christ is risen, really and truly risen**, and our Father is waiting patiently for us to wear out our hearts in our vain struggle so He can step in and rescue us from ourselves. It is, perhaps, when we are at the point of greatest hopelessness and despair that God’s mercy is most powerful.

Sunk beneath the weight of our own ego, God has us just where He wants us, ready to lay down the burden of trying to save ourselves and our world. By touching us with a mercy that is as undeniable as it is unbelievable, He tells us, while wiping away our tears,

³ Sticheron from the praises of Matins on Thomas Sunday

that all will be well. We may have messed things up badly, but it's OK; as far as salvation goes, *He has already done the job.*

*But I trust in your mercy.
Grant my heart joy in your salvation,
I will sing to the Lord,
for he has dealt bountifully with me! (Psalm 13:5-6)*

Your brother in Christ-God,

✠john michael
a sinner