

'A Day of Alleluia'

On behalf of Father (Joseph M.) Mayo (rector of The Cathedral of the Madeleine) and Father (Omar) Ontiveros (parochial vicar) and the deacons and staff of our cathedral, I join with them in wishing each and every one of you a most blessed Easter and a very holy Easter season.

This is a wonderful, wonderful time for us to celebrate, and we thank you for coming and for your support of this parish and this local church. How wonderful it is to be together to sing alleluia as one.

Tonight is the mother of all vigils, the summit of our faith. Jesus has pierced the veil, and through the shedding of his blood is now able to give new life to his church by sending the Holy Spirit, a sending made possible through his suffering, death, and resurrection.

The risen Christ speaks most eloquently tonight through his church made of living stones with Jesus himself as the capstone. Gathered here as church at the table of the Lord, our religious, lay, and clergy form that Body of Christ that was first modeled at the foot of the cross as Jesus spoke to his mother and his beloved disciple, and as he poured into his church the life-giving blood and water that flowed from his side.

We are gathered tonight as so many have done down through the ages, gazing at the light that pierces the darkness – a flame divided but undimmed – a pillar of fire that glows to the honor of God, mingling with the lights of heaven, and bravely burning to dispel the darkness of this night.

We are now ready, after the preparatory days of Lent to renew our baptisms and to bind ourselves more closely to Christ's passion, death and resurrection. And we as God's people are particularly aware of our elect; our catechumens and candidates who will be professed and receive tonight the Sacraments of Initiation.

Truly, we sense something special; something graced, something marvelous that is unfolding in our midst tonight. We are celebrating the resurrection of the Lord.

At each of these vigil celebrations we have a different Gospel depending on the cycle we're in. Tonight, we heard the Gospel of Luke. What is it that is different or that might give us a different way, or angle of celebrating this night? One thing is this - that Luke makes a change in the angelic proclamation. Notice that in tonight's Gospel, instead of telling the disciples to go to Galilee, the angel, rather reminds the disciples that Jesus predicted the passion through his Galilean ministry. And so the angel's proclamation ties together the disciples' pre-Easter experience with their post-Easter experience. Indeed, the New Testament asserts that both are equally important.

Without Easter, the historical Jesus is merely a figure of the past. And without the earthly Jesus, the resurrected Christ would be faceless. So we need both. Easter stands at the middle connecting the historical Christ with the risen Christ.

As one exegete puts in – Reginald Fuller – “the Easter Jesus is the eternal presence of the one who walked in Galilee and who died on the cross in Jerusalem.”

This to me is a very important point. It’s a very interesting reality in our Christian and spiritual pilgrimage – how our lives are a continuum, how the new life that we celebrate tonight is something that continually is beckoning us into a new chapter of our lives, but it doesn’t cut us off from what has been. We are rather on a journey of life, and this life is taken as a whole.

I’ve experienced this a little bit myself just a few weeks ago when I came to Utah. One of the first thoughts I had was, I’d better be careful and not talk too much about San Francisco. I’m just going to talk about Salt Lake City and Saint George and Moab and Provo and Bountiful and all the Utah places. I’d better not make it look like I’m still in San Francisco. But it dawned on me that I just didn’t pop into existence at the Salt Lake City Airport. But that rather I am, in large measure, who I am because of the people and the experiences and the grace of God at work in me when I was in San Francisco. And now, I am continuing. And all of those same graces are at work in me through you, through the people of this local church of the Diocese of Salt Lake City.

My point is this, that as we celebrate this new life, for those of you who are now to be baptized or to make your profession of faith, you are celebrating an important step in your lives of faith. This is new life. And for those of us who will be renewing our baptismal promises, we, too, are symbolically once again opening ourselves to new life.

But, it’s not that we’re going to become somebody we’re not. It’s not like the cartoons where we just pretend that we’re all of a sudden going to become this super hero, this super star. We’re still going to wake up tomorrow morning and the morning after and the morning after that. We’re going to look at ourselves and say, “Well, it’s the same old me. I have the same old job or whatever it is I’m doing.” But the reality remains that Christ through his Spirit is at work in us calling us to new life.

And so this new life is something that is subtle, but quite real. It is something that continually is at work in us. Sometimes we’re very aware of it. Quite often we’re not.

What we’re doing tonight is standing in the face of a great mystery. We are part, then, of this new life. We are part of this Passover experience where the more we change, the more we become renewed, the more we are truly who we are.

On Thursday, we celebrated God's Passover; passing over the Israelites' homes. Friday we celebrated Jesus as the Passover. Tonight we are called to pass over. You and I are called to new life; to move from death to new life, from darkness to light, from sin to grace, from the waters of chaos to the living waters of baptism.

This movement, this Passover, is not always easy. Sometimes we're complacent. We rather like it where we are. But most of the times, we're just afraid. Like those first visitors to the tomb of Jesus. The women and the disciples were fearful. What was going on?

But this fear and complacency gives way to faith. As we stand at the empty tomb we are called to believe.

We cannot know what it is like to be risen from the dead. We're still on this side of the veil. And it is difficult, indeed, it is impossible for us to perceive what it was like for Jesus to have been risen. All we can see on this side is an empty tomb, but it is precisely that empty tomb that beckons us to faith; that calls us to a point of decision. Do we believe or do we not? Do we believe that Christ has risen from the dead? Do we believe that the same Christ is calling you and me to new life every moment of our existence?

Our answer tonight in front of that empty tomb is, "Yes, Lord, we do believe." And so we sing, "Alleluia." And once we've come to that moment of faith, then we are called to proclaim this good news to a broken world; a world beset with war and disease, poverty and famine and suffering of all kinds; a world in which we see families in jeopardy; in which we see people terribly addicted to alcohol and drugs, consumerism, power and greed. It is a world in which we have many worries and many burdens. And yet, we proclaim that we are an Easter people and that Alleluia is our song.

And so we run with the Marys and the Sálomes and the disciples to proclaim in faith the wonder and the joy and the peace of Easter.

We face the empty tombs of our lives and we know that Christ is the one who calls us to new life. So tonight we join with the universal church and lift our voices in praise and glory to Jesus Christ our risen Lord; the one who is and who was and who is to come; who is the same yesterday, today, and forever; the almighty, the faithful witness; the first-born of the dead, and ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and who freed us from our sins with his blood, who has made us into a kingdom, priests for his God and Father – to him be glory and power forever and ever.

Homily given by the Most Reverend John C. Wester, Bishop of Salt Lake City at the Easter Vigil, April 7, 2007, in The Cathedra of the Madeleine