

Easter Morning Mass: April 12, 2020

In 1978 I entered the seminary straight out of high school. I had completed 12 years of Catholic education, first at the parish elementary school and then at a high school run by the Holy Ghost Fathers. I would say I had received a pretty good religious education by that point but, in many ways, seminary education was a whole new start.

One course I remember well that first year as on liturgy. Naturally this was a course that would be of central importance for my life as a priest, but as a college freshman most of the ideas and even the words were new to me. I'll never forget the day the professor said that, as Christians, "We are an Easter people and 'Alleluia' is our song."

This was something I would discover applies not just to the liturgical life of the church, but to how we live our whole Christian lives—as individual baptized Christian, as families, as parishes and as the universal church. It means that we always remember and live in the light of the resurrection of Jesus and the promise of forgiveness of sins and eternal life that he gives to those who are baptized into him.

Most of the time it's not too hard for me to believe that and—even if like the disciples in the gospel today I don't yet fully understand what it is I believe—to live a life that reflects the fundamental Christian idea that the cross leads to the resurrection, that sorrow gives way to joy, that death leads to eternal life.

However, at times like we are going through right now, I think of a new version of that professor's adage: "We are an Easter people living in a Good Friday world." The problem today is that it's a very long Good Friday and we don't know when it will end. We wait for it to end and we keep an active and attentive vigil so that we may be ready. But we also remember that we do not keep vigil alone.

The great liturgy of this feast of Jesus' resurrection is the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday night. You can watch the recording of the scaled-back

version I celebrated last night right here on Facebook, but I'd like to share with you again a little of how we and our fellow Christians are keeping vigil for this long Good Friday to end.

Here's some of what I said last night:

Tonight, we keep vigil with an Air Force Reserve surgeon from Northern California. Just this past week he was called up again and left his family, wife and four children—the oldest a freshman in college and the youngest in 8th grade. Tonight, he keeps vigil with us from the emergency room of a hospital in New York. And we keep vigil with him.

Tonight, we keep vigil with a public high school teacher who is due to have her first child in less than three weeks. However, less than six weeks before her baby was due, her school closed and she and her husband, who is also a teacher began to teach through distance learning. In addition to the normal anxiety about the upcoming birth of her first child, she also worries about the uncertainties caused by the coronavirus, its impact on the hospital where she will give birth, and many other issues that no one in her position could possibly have expected as they wait the joyful arrival of their first child. Tonight, she and her husband keep vigil with us, and we keep vigil with them.

Tonight, we keep vigil with those who were expecting to receive the sacraments of initiation at the Easter Vigil tonight. Those in our parish and in parishes around the world who will have to wait for an indeterminate period of time to become full members of our Catholic faith community and join us at the table of the Eucharist for the first time. They set out on this journey and entered the Lenten season expecting to have the joy of professing their faith and being sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit.

On that journey, too, are the young people of our parish who were to receive First Holy Communion and Confirmation this Spring and don't now know when that will happen. Tonight, they keep vigil with us, and we keep vigil with them.

Tonight, we keep vigil with families from our parish and other places who have recently lost someone they love. Perhaps it was an expected death, but one that was made much harder to handle by difficulty of access to a retirement or care home. Perhaps it was a sudden or unexpected death where family and friends cannot gather in a candlelight vigil or in another way to support one another. Whatever the circumstances, their grief is compounded by the uncertainty of not knowing when funerals will happen. Tonight, they keep vigil with us, and we keep vigil with them.

Tonight, we keep vigil with engaged couples from our parish and elsewhere whose wedding plans have been thrown into disarray.

We keep vigil with students who won't be able to celebrate graduation with their classmates.

We keep vigil with those in the military and their families who, even though they are used to uncertainty, have yet another reason to wonder about when they will be reunited.

We keep vigil with first responders, medical personnel and others who work in essential jobs that bring them in contact with others on a daily basis.

We keep vigil with an elementary school student who is getting ready to begin another round of cancer treatment this week, and with her family.

We keep vigil with those who have tested positive for the virus and those who are ill with it and with their families.

We keep vigil with those who are far from home because they were travelling when the virus began to spread and have been unable to rejoin those they love at home.

We keep vigil with those who are isolated alone, and with families who are still struggling to cope with the stress of being together 24/7 and trying to maintain some sense of normalcy.

These are but a few of the situations in which we and those we love and care about find themselves on this Easter Sunday morning.

They keep vigil with us, and we keep vigil with them.

But we also keep vigil with Mary Magdalene in today's gospel—the first chosen by Jesus to be witness to his disciples and to the world of the joy and hope of the resurrection.

We keep vigil with her as she walks in under the gradually rising light of the sun that dispels the physical darkness toward her encounter with the Risen Son of God who dispels the darkness of all uncertainty, fear and anxiety.

We keep vigil with Peter and the other disciple who, after hearing Mary's story of the empty tomb, run there anxious to find out what it's all about. We keep vigil especially with the other disciple who believed, although none of them yet fully understood what was going on or what it meant.

Normally, at Easter Sunday Mass, I would talk about how our vigil is over. But this year we still wait. We wait for an end to our long human Good Friday. But, even as we wait, we accept the challenge of being people of faith who do not yet fully understand what is happening to us, or why, or when it will end.

Even though we still cannot fully wrap our minds around the notion of celebrating Easter in the midst of the pandemic and its effects on our lives, we accept the call to faith—not a faith just in statements of belief like the ones we will make in our Renewal of Baptismal Promises this morning. Rather we recommit to a faith that is lived in the concrete circumstances of our ongoing vigil, our shared waiting to be raised up to be an Easter People again

As we think about how we can live out our faith without fully understanding it or what is happening to us, I'd like to repeat (as I did last night) the words I quoted on Thursday from the late Cardinal Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan as on his time in solitary confinement

under the Vietnamese Communist regime. These words tell us how we can live in profoundly uncertain times in a way that reflects our faith in the promise of resurrection from all that oppresses us, especially as we—like Mary Magdalene going while it was still dark, as she thought, just to finish the burial rites for Jesus’ human remains—journey together through the darkness of the current pandemic and its effect on all our lives:

All prisoners, myself included, constantly wait to be let go. I decided then and there that my captivity would not be merely a time of resignation but a turning point in my life. I decided I would not wait. I would live the present moment and fill it with love. For if I wait, the things I wait for will never happen. The only thing that I can be sure of is that I am going to die.

No, I will not spend time waiting. I will live the present moment and fill it with love.