

Easter 2006

For centuries, the Eastern Catholic churches have celebrated their faith through icons - painting of Christ, the Virgin Mary, the saints and scenes from the Gospel that are stunning in their simple and austere beauty.

There is a very famous icon that depicts the resurrection of Christ. The icon, originally painted in the earliest days of Christianity depicts the Risen Christ standing on the battered down doors of hell. He is extending his hands to a man and a woman, representing Adam and Eve, who seem to be emerging from their tombs. The two figures look surprised. Locks and chains, symbols of bondage, float mysteriously in a vast black space below the figures.

Christ's taking of Adam and Eve's hands is not merely an affectionate clasp. If you look at the icon closely, you can see that Christ has Adam and Eve by the wrists and is forcefully yanking them out of their tombs into the freedom of the resurrection. But Adam and Eve are not too sure that they want to be freed from their tombs. Their wide eyes suggest not only surprise but confusion and anxiety.

The lesson of the icon is that the freedom of the Spirit, which is the gift of the risen Christ, is not always a gentle or immediately welcomed experience. There is a certain sense of security and safety in our confinement: in our "tombs" we know the boundaries, we understand the limits, we have learned how to make life work within our little plots - but along comes the Easter Christ to tear down the walls we have erected, to pull us out of our tombs and into the full light of life.

Easter calls us to realize possibilities that we cannot imagine in our entombed existence.

Easter is the great feast of possibilities.

Each of us can say that the Almighty One lifts me, raises us, from all wretchedness and clothes us with dignity and honour.

Jesus Christ has died and risen for all of us - whether spectacularly or boringly sinful, lazy, indifferent, rich, poor, gay, straight, married, single, divorced, pious, and indifferent. The Holy One counts us all "worthy to stand in God's presence and serve God". That is why, in the risen Lord, we offer our thanks and praise. What a noble and ennobling vision of human beings!

Entrusted with caring for the world as God's royal people, we trust life, delight in and protect creation, and honour each other because we expect to find God grace in all the stuff of our history.

It means that we may never diminish what it means to be human: rather than make sin the centrepiece of human existence, we invite each other to live up to the fullness of our dignity in Christ as the measure of being truly human and fully alive, truly made in God's image and likeness. Our shifted focus places before us the icon of the true humanity: Jesus, man towel-wrapped and washing feet, broken on the cross, a re-born saviour forever marked by humanity's indignity to God and human alike.

It means that we support each other, not in the search for an impossible perfection, but in following the demands of the new covenant. The respectful, consistent affirmation that we are all "in Christ" can gradually transform shaky self-esteem and semi-conditional positive regard into the confidence and humility that characterize Spirit-filled witnesses.

We embody God's peace, share God's life, proclaim God's forgiveness, do God's justice, and sing God's praise. Reborn into another way of living and being, individually and as members of Christ's Body, we are empowered to bring Easter life to workplace and neighbourhood, to share it with family and stranger alike. Our baptismal dignity becomes the font from which ethical living flows.

In his rising from the dead Christ enables us to make possible in our own lives all that he taught and lived throughout his brief life among us: that love, compassion, generosity, humility and selflessness will ultimately triumph over hatred, bigotry, prejudice, despair, greed and death. The empty tomb is the sign of perfect hope - that in Christ all things are possible, that we can make of our lives what we want them to be, that we can become the people God created us to be.

I am going to give the last word this morning to Brendan who is telling his younger siblings his version of the Holy Week/Easter tale. Palm Sunday, he said was a big parade. Then later in the week Jesus and his disciples had a big party but some of the folks at the party didn't act right and let some bad outsiders take Jesus away. Jesus was real brave because he loved everyone and knew that if you loved people you could never really be hurt, except for a short time. And Jesus proved that was so by not staying dead for very long. Now we know that we don't have to be afraid of bad things.