

# Archbishop Lori's Homily: Easter Sunday 2018

*Easter Sunday*

*Basilica of the Assumption*

*April 1, 2018*

Years ago, a friend of mine who is not a believer, attended my Easter Sunday Mass. After Mass, he came to the sacristy where I was taking off my vestments. We exchanged pleasantries but I could see something was bothering him. He started to leave, but then he stopped, turned around, and said to me, "Let me ask you something. You've been talking all morning about a man who died and came back to life. Doesn't that bother you? How can you believe such a thing?" Needless to say, our conversation took a new turn and lasted longer than I expected. We talked for quite a while, and although I did my best to respond to his concerns, I must confess that I achieved no breakthrough.

My lack of success prompted me to wonder. I speak so often and so confidently about the Resurrection of the Lord. I profess it every Sunday in the Creed and weave it into all my homilies. I always speak of the Resurrection as I seek to console the sick and dying and win back to the Faith those who have strayed. Yet, if my belief in the Resurrection just rolls off the tip of my tongue and doesn't confound me intellectually and amaze me spiritually – have I unwittingly reduced it in my own mind to "a pious legend?" – Is the Resurrection just a nice ending to a sad story? Is it just an all-purpose bromide, a soothing remark, designed to short-circuit any real discussion of human suffering and death, especially the senseless variety?

These are questions with which every Christian must wrestle. And let's be clear: even the first Christians wrestled with it. Mary Magdalene, for example, on arriving in the pre-dawn darkness, found the stone at the entrance of Jesus' tomb rolled back. Her first thought was that someone had stolen Jesus' body, a rumor that in fact spread throughout antiquity. Matthew's Gospel tells us that the guards at the entrance to the tomb were paid off to say that someone came during the night and stole Jesus' body. But today's reading from John's Gospel seeks to dispel that rumor

by describing explicitly how the burial clothes were folded up and neatly arranged – hardly the work of grave robbers working under duress. Today's Gospel reading also describes the reaction of John the Beloved Disciple upon peering into the tomb. It says that John "saw and believed" . . . but it adds, 'the disciples themselves did not yet understand that Jesus had to rise from the dead.' As John looked inside the tomb, he began to believe – at least he believed that Jesus' body had not been stolen; but full-fledged faith in Jesus' Resurrection and New Life came later, even for John.

Grave robbery, of course, isn't the only explanation for the disciples' belief in Jesus' Resurrection. According to another theory, the disciples had been traumatized by the brutal death of their Master, a pied piper and a creative religious genius. To cope with this trauma, or so the theory goes, his followers devised and accepted as true a delusional story: Their Lord and Master was alive after all. He had risen from the dead. They did this, we are told, not only to console themselves but also to launch a new religious movement, if you will, a new cult. Now, this "psychological" explanation might sound plausible to some in our day, but frankly, it is hard to imagine that an illiterate group of Galilean fishermen would cook up on their own a story so at odds with their own Jewish faith, namely, that God became one of us, then died, rose, and returned to heaven in a human body... and this as a subconscious way of coping with their depression. Even if that had happened, is it plausible that such a story could have lasted more than a few years, let alone become a turning point in the history of humanity?

In his 1<sup>st</sup> Letter to the Corinthians, one of the earliest parts of the New Testament, St. Paul makes clear that Christianity rises or falls on truth of the Resurrection. It is not a ruse, a happy ending, or a way of coping: it is the heart of our religion. He tells us that if Christ is not raised from the dead, we who believe are most of all to be pitied (cf. 1 Cor. 15:19). All of which lead us back to the Person of Jesus, to Jesus who spoke often of his sacrificial death... but not a death such as you and I will someday experience after a short span of years. For as often as he spoke of death, Jesus also spoke of the Resurrection that would follow, *an immediate, historical resurrection in our humanity*, body and soul. So what are we to make of this?

Ultimately, we have two choices. Either we will judge Christ according to own

standards, according to our own experience, our own way of tackling difficult questions – in which case we might conclude that Jesus was merely a brilliant human being, an inspiring teacher of ethics who was killed because of politics and intrigue, and that the Resurrection was a matter of self-deception on the part of his followers, thus emptying the Christian faith and our lives of their content and hope. Or else, we may come to the realization that it's not just the Resurrection but the whole of Christ's existence that demands faith on our part: his identity as God's Son; his incarnation; his preaching and miracles; his death on the Cross; his rising from the dead; his exaltation in heaven. In the logic of the Gospel, then, Jesus' Resurrection is not an outlandish event but rather "the blossoming of the seed that was always within him."

So, every aspect of the life of Jesus Christ demands our faith... not a faith which is a leap into irrationality, but rather the surrender of ourselves to an immensely beautiful and powerful love, a love that corresponds to the deepest desire of our hearts – the desire for absolute love, the desire to share in God's life and love forever. Faith opens the door to *God's* love, which awakens and enflames *our* love, and it is love that leads us truly to know who Jesus is and what he did for us. When we allow God to radiate his love in our hearts, hope of eternal life is born in us. In him alone we find a love that is stronger than sin and more powerful than death.

Moments from now we will renew our baptismal promises. We will promise anew to reject Satan and to embrace afresh the Church's faith, the cornerstone of which is the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. The words we will say are familiar to us yet how easy to miss the forest for the trees. But the Creed is not a "to-do" list. The true significance of our profession of faith is that we surrender our lives to the only One who can break the grip which Satan and the world have on our hearts, so as to open them to that love which brings us a peace and joy the world cannot give.

If we surrender to the One whose love broke the bonds of sin and death, if love opens for us the truest understanding of Jesus, then, I assure you, our lives will be profoundly changed. No one welcomes such love into their hearts and at the same time takes it for granted, relegates it to the margins of one's life, lets everything else take priority. Rather, the hope and joy engendered by the Resurrection will overtake us even amid the anxieties, problems, and sufferings of daily life. If so, we will begin

to judge those things, not according to our own standards, but according to the standards that Christ taught us, confident that in picking up our Cross and following in Christ's footsteps, we ourselves will arrive at the Resurrection of the Dead and Life in the world to come. Amen. Alleluia! Alleluia!