



## Easter Sunday of the Resurrection of the Lord April 12, 2020

- ◆ A VERY DIFFERENT EASTER SUNDAY
- ◆ FAITH IN THE MIDST OF A STORM  
BY POPE FRANCIS
- ◆ VARIOUS TYPES OF FAITH

Easter Greetings to all of you! As we all know, this Easter Sunday is like no other Easter Sunday any of us has experienced in our lifetime. On a normal Easter Sunday, large numbers of people would be in church including many who normally do not come to church. This Easter 2020, we as a nation are doing something totally new to us: we are *socially distancing*. And most places in our country are on lockdown, including Florida.

The elderly especially, like myself, are told to stay home. School children are home that so many parents are faced with the challenge of childcare if they *have to* leave home to work. Those parents who can work from home have to deal with young children who are missing their friends and getting antsy at home.

Some families have loved ones in nursing homes, rehabilitation centers or hospitals, but cannot visit them. People in retirement centers have to stay in their room to eat, and they miss socializing with their friends.

This pandemic has profoundly impacted countless lives, most notably of course, the medical personnel at the front lines of this war—God bless them and protect them. A powerful imagery to express what we are going through is that of Jesus and his disciples when they were caught in a mighty storm. Pope Francis used this imagery in his address to the whole world on March 27 (Urbi et Orbi).

### FAITH IN THE MIDST OF A STORM

Pope Francis meditated on the calming of the storm from the Gospel of Mark during the prayer service over which he presided on the steps of St. Peter's Basilica on Friday evening. Below is the full text.

“When evening had come” (Mk 4:35). The Gospel passage we have just heard begins like this. For weeks now it has been evening. Thick darkness has gathered

over our squares, our streets and our cities; it has taken over our lives, filling everything with a deafening silence and a distressing void, that stops everything as it passes by; we feel it in the air, we notice in people's gestures, their glances give them away. We find ourselves afraid and lost. Like the disciples in the Gospel we were caught off guard by an unexpected, turbulent storm. We have realized that we are on the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented, but at the same time important and needed, all of us called to row together, each of us in need of comforting the other. On this boat...are all of us. Just like those disciples, who spoke anxiously with one voice, saying “We are perishing” (v.38), so we too have realized that we cannot go on thinking of ourselves, but only together can we do this.

It is easy to recognize ourselves in this story. What is harder to understand is Jesus' attitude. While his disciples are quite naturally alarmed and desperate, he stands in the stern, in the part of the boat that sinks first. And what does he do? In spite of the tempest, he sleeps soundly, trusting in the Father; this is the only time in the Gospels we see Jesus sleeping. When he wakes up, after calming the wind and the waters, he turns to the disciples in a reproaching voice: “Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?” (v.40).

Let us try to understand. In what does the lack of the disciples' faith consist, as contrasted with Jesus' trust? They had not stopped believing in him; in fact, they called on him. But we see how they call on him: “Teacher, do you not care if we perish?” (v.38). *Do you not care*: they think that Jesus is not interested in them, does not care about them. One of the things that hurts us and our families most when we hear it said is: “Do you not care about me?” It is a phrase that wounds and unleashes storms in our hearts. It would have shaken Jesus too. Because he, more than anyone, cares about us. Indeed, once they have called on him, he saves his disciples from their discouragement.

The storm exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities. It shows us how we have allowed to become dull and feeble the very things that nourish,

sustain and strengthen our lives and our communities. The tempest lays bare all our prepackaged ideas and forgetfulness of what nourishes our people's souls; all those attempts that anesthetize us with ways of thinking and acting that supposedly "save" us, but instead prove incapable of putting us in touch with our roots and keeping alive the memory of those who have gone before us. We deprive ourselves of the antibodies we need to confront adversity.

In this storm, the façade of those stereotypes with which we camouflaged our egos, always worrying about our image, has fallen away, uncovering once more that (blessed) common belonging, of which we cannot be deprived: our belonging as brothers and sisters.

*"Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?"* Lord, your word this evening strikes us and regards us, all of us. In this world, that you love more than we do, we have gone ahead at breakneck speed, feeling powerful and able to do anything. Greedy for profit, we let ourselves get caught up in things, and lured away by haste. We did not stop at your reproach to us, we were not shaken awake by wars or injustice across the world, nor did we listen to the cry of the poor or of our ailing planet. We carried on regardless, thinking we would stay healthy in a world that was sick. Now that we are in a stormy sea, we implore you: "Wake up, Lord!"

*"Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?"* Lord, you are calling to us, calling us to faith. Which is not so much believing that you exist, but coming to you and trusting in you. This Lent your call reverberates urgently: "Be converted!", "Return to me with all your heart" (Joel 2:12). You are calling on us to seize this time of trial as a *time of choosing*. It is not the time of your judgement, but of our judgement: a time to choose what matters and what passes away, a time to separate what is necessary from what is not. It is a time to get our lives back on track with regard to you, Lord, and to others. We can look to so many exemplary companions for the journey, who, even though fearful, have reacted by giving their lives. This is the force of the Spirit poured out and fashioned in courageous and generous self-denial. It is the life in the Spirit that can redeem, value and demonstrate how our lives are woven together and sustained by ordinary people—often forgotten people—who do not appear in newspaper and magazine headlines nor on the grand catwalks of the latest show, but who without any doubt are in these very days writing the decisive events of our time: doctors, nurses, supermarket employees, cleaners, caregivers, providers of transport, law and order forces, volunteers, priests, religious men and women and so very many others who have understood that no one reaches salvation by

themselves. In the face of so much suffering, where the authentic development of our peoples is assessed, we experience the priestly prayer of Jesus: "That they may all be one" (Jn 17:21). How many people every day are exercising patience and offering hope, taking care to sow not panic but a shared responsibility. How many fathers, mothers, grandparents and teachers are showing our children, in small everyday gestures, how to face up to and navigate a crisis by adjusting their routines, lifting their gaze and fostering prayer. How many are praying, offering and interceding for the good of all. Prayer and quiet service: these are our victorious weapons.

*"Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?"* Faith begins when we realize we are in need of salvation. We are not self-sufficient; by ourselves we flounder; we need the Lord, like ancient navigators needed the stars. Let us invite Jesus into the boats of our lives. Let us hand over our fears to him so that he can conquer them. Like the disciples, we will experience that with him on board there will be no shipwreck. Because this is God's strength: turning to the good everything that happens to us, even the bad things. He brings serenity into our storms, because with God life never dies.

The Lord asks us and, in the midst of our tempest, invites us to reawaken and put into practice that solidarity and hope capable of giving strength, support and meaning to these hours when everything seems to be floundering. The Lord awakens so as to reawaken and revive our Easter faith. We have an anchor: by his cross we have been saved. We have a rudder: by his cross we have been redeemed. We have a hope: by his cross we have been healed and embraced so that nothing and no one can separate us from his redeeming love. In the midst of isolation when we are suffering from a lack of tenderness and chances to meet up, and we experience the loss of so many things, let us once again listen to the proclamation that saves us: he is risen and is living by our side. The Lord asks us from his cross to rediscover the life that awaits us, to look towards those who look to us, to strengthen, recognize and foster the grace that lives within us. Let us not quench the wavering flame (cf. Is 42:3) that never falters, and let us allow hope to be rekindled.

Embracing his cross means finding the courage to embrace all the hardships of the present time, abandoning for a moment our eagerness for power and possessions in order to make room for the creativity that only the Spirit is capable of inspiring. It means finding the courage to create spaces where everyone can recognize that they are called, and to allow new forms of hospitality, fraternity and solidarity. By his cross we

have been saved in order to embrace hope and let it strengthen and sustain all measures and all possible avenues for helping us protect ourselves and others. Embracing the Lord in order to embrace hope: that is the strength of faith, which frees us from fear and gives us hope.

*“Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?”* Dear brothers and sisters, from this place that tells of Peter’s rock-solid faith, I would like this evening to entrust all of you to the Lord, through the intercession of Mary, Health of the People and Star of the stormy Sea. From this colonnade that embraces Rome and the whole world, may God’s blessing come down upon you as a consoling embrace. Lord, may you bless the world, give health to our bodies and comfort our hearts. You ask us not to be afraid. Yet our faith is weak and we are fearful. But you, Lord, will not leave us at the mercy of the storm. Tell us again: “Do not be afraid” (Mt 28:5). And we, together with Peter, “cast all our anxieties onto you, for you care about us” (cf. 1Pet 5:7)

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## MORE REFLECTIONS ON FAITH

Since our ten-page bulletin does not need space to advertise parish events which have all been cancelled, we have lots of room for an extended column. Continuing the focus on faith, I will now share with you a column I wrote for Easter Sunday 2013.

- Four types of faith
- How one comes to believe in God
- Four ways to protect and nurture our faith
- Four things that can weaken and/or destroy faith
- Suggestions for dealing with a crisis of faith
- Characteristics of a strong faith

The great French writer, Blaise Pascal, once said: *“There is enough light for those who want to see and darkness enough for those who are otherwise inclined.”*

Religious faith is a very precious gift. We who possess it or are possessed by it are very blessed. But we need to remember that it can be lost if not nurtured and cared for.

### Four types of faith

**Natural faith** helps us to believe in and trust the word of another. We exercise this kind of faith daily. We cannot live without it. For example, we trust that the

food we buy at the store is okay to eat and will not poison us. We trust that the buildings we live and work in will not collapse on us. When couples on their wedding day promise to love each other in good times and in bad, they place their faith in the word of each other.

**Religious faith** is a *supernatural* gift or inner sense that enables us to believe in the existence of God or a Higher Power. This faith enables us to believe that God or this Higher Power is kindly disposed towards us and that we can enter into a personal relationship with him. Furthermore, religious faith enables us to believe that God forgives our faults and failings when we express sorrow for them and that he can help us overcome attitudes and behaviors that can be very destructive to us and our relationships. One of the best known examples is the AA (Alcoholic Anonymous), a spiritually based program in which men and women addicted to alcohol come together to help each other overcome their addiction. The first three steps of AA state:

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God, as we *understood Him*.

Since the beginning of the AA movement in 1935 in Ohio, millions of people have experienced a divine presence which helped them to transform their lives. A person with an active religious faith believes not only in the existence of God but that this Divine Presence can and will help transform his/her life. By contrast, a *practical atheist* is one who lives his life as if God did not exist.

**Christian faith** enables us to believe in a triune God, in one God with three divine persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Christian faith enables one to develop a personal relationship with each of the three persons of the Blessed Trinity. Christian faith also has a *communal* dimension which moves us to join a community of Christian believers in worship, fellowship, learning and action. Christian faith enables us to believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God and helps one to live one’s life according to the Word of God.

**Catholic faith** comprises all of the above and, in addition, leads us to accept as true all that the Catholic Church believes and teaches to be revealed by God, i.e.:

- The Catholic Church was founded by Jesus Christ 2,000 years ago (Mt 16:13-20) and he continues to

guide and protect the Church from falling into error when it comes to the essentials of our faith (Mt 28:19-20). Catholics believe that the Pope is the successor of St. Peter and the head of the Church.

- Catholics believe in the *sacramental life* of the Church. When the Word became flesh, God walked in our midst in a *visible* way. Today, Catholics continue to encounter Christ in a *tangible* way in the celebration of the *seven sacraments*. For example, at Mass we believe that we receive the Body and Blood of Christ in the form of bread and wine (Jn 6:48-58, 1Cor 11:23-32). In the confessional, when the priest raises his hand and pronounces the words of absolution, we believe that Jesus, through the priest, forgives our sins in a visible and audible way (Jn 20:22-23).
- *Catholic faith* expresses itself in respect for *all human life, born and unborn*, in caring for the poor, and in following Jesus' Great Commandment of Love.
- Catholics venerate Mary and the Saints. *We do not worship* them but *honor* them and seek their intercession. In the Cana story (Jn 2:1-2), we see the power of Mary's intercession with Jesus.

#### How does one come to believe in God?

In the spiritual realm, Catholic Christians often use the phrase "All is grace." By this, we mean that any movement towards *God*, Jesus, or the Church is the result of God drawing us to himself whether or not we are aware of it. In John 6:46, Jesus says: "*No one can come to me unless he is drawn by the Father who sent me.*" We know that God uses many instruments or tools to draw us to him, to faith in Jesus and to his Church. For example:

- Most believers come to faith in God in and through their *parents* and the religious environment that they were raised in. In time, children will have to affirm and own in a *personal* way the faith of their childhood. This may happen gradually over a period of time or rather quickly or suddenly as a result of some crisis, a spiritual retreat or experience. (Acts 9:1-19 tells of Paul's *sudden* conversion to Christianity.) Or it may never happen. Sadly, many Christians and Catholics who had the benefit of a solid religious foundation at home never made an *adult commitment* to Christ and to the Church. They failed to "accept Jesus into their heart as their Lord and Savior" (Rom 10:9-10). Many are reluctant to take this step because they do not want to give control of their lives to anyone, not even to God or Jesus. Others are afraid of where such a step may lead

them, just as some people are afraid to enter into the commitment of marriage. But millions of others who *sincerely* say, "Jesus, I am sorry for all my sins and I ask you to come into my life as Lord and Savior," have a 'born again' experience. For these people, this *faith step* is a huge turning point in their lives.

- God frequently uses the *witness of other believers* to draw us to him and to his Church. (See Jn 4:27-42 for an example of a non-believer coming to faith and in turn leading others to Christ.)
- God sometimes uses a *personal crisis* to draw us to him, e.g., The good thief on the cross reaching out for Jesus (Lk 23:39-43).
- *Prayer and study*. Personal searching through prayer and study has led millions of people to religious faith, Christian faith and/or Catholic faith. The best-selling book, *Surprised by the Truth*, edited by Patrick Madrid, tells the story of how eleven Protestant ministers, most of whom were raised in an anti-Catholic atmosphere, came to embrace the Catholic faith against great odds through prayer and study. Such stories show the power of God's grace at work in the hearts and minds of his people.

#### Four ways to protect and nurture our faith

- Catholics believe that the gift of faith is planted in our soul at Baptism. But this gift needs to be nurtured and developed if it is to have a tangible impact on our lives.
- We protect and nurture our faith by *practicing* it (the same is true with love). We practice our faith when we seek God's guidance on decisions, seek his strength in times of weakness and fear, seek his help in forgiving hurts. We nurture our faith by regularly participating in the Eucharist, sharing our financial resources with the poor and with our Church, and sharing our faith with others. Every time we *witness* to our faith, we strengthen it.
- We protect and nurture our faith by *belonging to a community of believers* who will support us and help us grow in faith. In many churches today, especially in large parishes, members join *Small Christian Communities* or home groups, which give them a chance to study together and share life, fellowship and prayer. At present, we have many such small Christian communities at Ascension Church.
- *Fidelity to personal prayer and spiritual reading*. If good communication is the key to a healthy relationship between two people, we can say that honest prayer is the key to a good relationship with God. Many also find spiritual reading to be an

effective way to nurture their relationship with God.

- *Retreat experiences.* Just as a marriage enrichment retreat could strengthen a marriage, a personal spiritual retreat could help deepen our relationship with God. At Ascension, we offer four retreat weekends each year—two for men and two for women.

#### Four things that can weaken/destroy our faith

Relationships can be weakened by communication gap, by conflicts that do not get resolved, or by plain neglect. Below are four things that can weaken or even destroy our relationship with God.

- Failure to practice our faith. The old axiom, “If you don’t use it, you lose it,” certainly applies to one’s faith life. Sadly, millions of Christians lose their faith by failing to practice and nurture it.
- If our faith is not sufficiently developed, painful experiences may have a very destructive impact on our belief in God, e.g., Death of a loved one for whom we prayed hard to God for healing; failure of our Church community to help us in time of great need.

In Jesus’ commentary on the *Parable of the Sower*, he speaks about ‘Satan stealing the word’ that was sown in our hearts. He warns that the seed of faith may not grow in us because of our preoccupation with ‘the worries of this world,’ ‘the lure of riches’ and ‘other passions’ (Mk 4:13-20). Today, many baptized Christians are so caught up in a secularist,

- materialistic lifestyle that God is given little or no room in their lives.
- Having professors at school who skillfully poke holes in our religious beliefs.

#### Suggestions for dealing with spiritual crisis

Just as two people’s love for each other will be tested sooner or later, so will it be with our faith in God and Church. Situations can lead to spiritual crisis, e.g. unanswered prayers, bad things happening to us or to a loved one, unpleasant experiences with our Church, living in a secular atmosphere where God is absent and is looked upon as irrelevant. How we respond to spiritual crisis can either *deepen* or *weaken* our faith. Hopefully, a spiritual crisis will lead to a deepening of our faith if we seriously commit to undertaking the following:

- Availing ourselves of *an experienced spiritual guide* who will respect our experiences, questions and doubts and, at the same time, help us to come to a

deeper and more mature adult faith. We may need to learn to let go of some *childhood misunderstanding* of how God works. For example, we may have believed that if we say our prayers, go to church and try to live good lives, God will not allow bad things to happen to us. Obviously, bad things can and do happen to very good faith-filled people. Such bad things can be a ‘faith-tester’ or, worse still, a ‘faith-buster.’ A good spiritual guide can help us negotiate our way through bad experiences that shake our faith.

- Having faith *friends* who will support us through the tough times.
- *Fidelity to honest prayer.* The *worst thing* we can do when a spiritual crisis comes our way is to quit praying. Yet this is exactly what many people do. The *best thing* we can do is to hang in there with God and tell him exactly how we feel. We may find ourselves getting mad with God for the first time in our lives. This is very good. In truth, learning to express our disappointment or anger with God is a major step in our spiritual development, just as learning how to deal with conflict is a major step in human relationship.
- *Reading inspiring stories* of other believers who had bad things happen to them and who not only survived the crisis but also grew stronger through it. *Amazing Grace for Those Who Suffer* is a book of stories about people who went through such experiences.

#### Four characteristics of a strong, mature Christian faith

Sometimes we hear people say, “My grandmother was very religious. She had a very strong faith.” What do we mean by a strong faith? The following are some characteristics of a strong Christian faith:

- *Faith that informs our decisions.* In John 4:34, Jesus says: “*My food is to do the will of him who sent me.*” In the journey of life, to what extent is God my co-pilot? Seeking God’s guidance with decisions is a sign of a mature faith.
- *Faith that helps us cope with the crosses of life.* When we see someone courageously coping with the painful experiences of life, we know we are in the presence of a person with a strong faith. Faith can help us find *meaning* and even a *gift* in the difficult experiences of life. This is one good reason why we should do everything we can to develop a strong faith.
- *Faith that is able to forgive life’s hurts and injustices.* The Amish community forgiving the gunman who killed five of their girls is an outstanding example of faith in action.

- *Faith that leads us to do works of charity.* In one of his letters, St. James tells us that faith that does not express itself in good deeds is dead (2:14-23).

Have a blessed Easter,

*Fr. Aaron*



### ***AN EASTER HOUSE BLESSING***

It is an excellent idea to bless your home even if it had been officially blessed before. We cannot ask God and his angels often enough to bless and protect our home and all who live in it. You can say the following prayer with all present before sharing your Easter dinner, or pray it at any other suitable time.

*Lord,*

*We rejoice in the victory of your Son over death:  
by rising from the tomb to new life  
he gives us new hope and promise.*

*Bless all the members of this household  
and surround us with your protection,  
that we may find comfort and peace  
in Jesus Christ, the Paschal Lamb,  
who lives and reigns with you and the*

*Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen*

Now sprinkle the rooms of the house with holy water and then say:

*Let this water call to mind our Baptism in Christ,  
who by his death and Resurrection has redeemed us.*

### ***A PRAYER FOR THIS TIME***

As we seek to deal with fear, worry, stress, and uncertainty, we must turn to God for refuge and strength. In the prayer below, I seek to capture some or most of the things we should be daily praying for at this time. If you like the prayer, please share it with others. I encourage parents to pray this prayer with your children. It can serve as a teaching moment for them as they learn about all the aspects of this battle that our whole world

is engaged in. The one thing that *all* of us can do daily, is pray—be it this prayer or some other prayer. Let us not forget that we are in a global battle and each of us must play our part to defeat this unseen and insidious enemy.

Lord Jesus, our Good Shepherd and refuge in times of stress, we come to you during this time when lives everywhere are threatened and disrupted at every level.

We pray for the thousands of people who have already lost their lives to this virus. We pray for their grieving loved ones.

We pray for the elderly in nursing homes and all those in hospitals who cannot receive visits from their loved ones.

We pray for doctors and nurses and also pray for first responders who daily are working long hours and risking their lives to help people infected with this insidious virus.

We pray for the protection of all those who continue to serve us at this time, such as, police officers, firefighters, EMT's, the media, employees in food stores and pharmacies.

We pray for hospitals overwhelmed with patients and faced with a shortfall of medical supplies. We pray for all who are working day and night to make the medical equipment and supplies that our hospitals are desperately in need of.

We pray for all who are engaged in research to discover a vaccine to fight this terrible virus. Holy Spirit, bless the work of their minds and hands.

During this time of national crisis, we pray for our leaders working in all branches and levels of government to put political differences aside and work together and efficiently for the welfare of all.

We pray for all who have already lost their jobs or are in fear of losing their jobs and wondering how they are going to pay their bills. We pray for our

**economy during this time.**

**We pray and ask God's blessing on our Social Concerns office and all social agencies that are seeking to offer aid to those in need. We also remember in prayer all those whose names are on our Prayer Chain list.**

**We pray for ourselves, that we will do what we need to do to protect ourselves and others from this disease. We pray that we will be ready and willing to help others in whatever way we can. We pray for children and adolescents who are experiencing an extended period of lockdown in their homes. May they learn new ways to be together.**

**We pray for our Church leaders and Church family. Lord, you always seek to bring good out of bad things. May this be a time of extra prayer and reflection so that we can hear and see what you wish to teach us during this time. May this challenging time help us to be more compassionate and less selfish.**

**May this time of disruption help us to never take for granted the many graces we daily enjoy, including the wonderful blessing of being able to gather together for communal prayer and worship. Amen.**

**- Fr. Eamon Tobin**

**The above is just a suggested prayer. If it does not speak to your heart, create a prayer that does. After you finished praying the above prayer or a similar one, say a decade or two of the Rosary for the above intentions.**