
**The Mystery of Faith
Seminary Chapel Message
April 16, 2006**



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In the name of God, sovereign savior, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

The Easter liturgy begins with these triumphant words: "Alleluia, Christ is risen." And the people respond with great hope: "The Lord is risen, indeed. Alleluia."

Two things in particular impress me about this invitation to worship. First, it includes the word "alleluia." Our son was in third grade when he realized that during Lent the word "alleluia" was dropped entirely from the Sunday morning liturgy in our church. One Sunday that year when we gathered after church for lunch he commented that the liturgy seemed so different with this one word removed. "The liturgy," he said, "has so much less joy to it." Not bad liturgical insight from a young boy!

I was even more intrigued, however, the following year when our family was driving home from Church one Sunday morning. It was the last Sunday before Lent and Linda and I were discussing the possibility of attending a service mid-week on Ash Wednesday. Listening from the back seat of the car, Nathaniel picked up on our conversation and asked, "Does Lent begin next Sunday." When we replied that it did, he commented, "Then today was say-goodbye-to-Alleluia-Sunday."

The liturgy does have so much less joy to it when this one word is removed. And so it is that for some years now our family has regretted the beginning of Lent and we have rejoiced at the coming of Easter. Alleluia leaves, and then alleluia returns.

The second thing that impresses me about the introduction to the Easter liturgy, however, is the use of the present tense. "Christ is risen...the Lord is risen, indeed." This is quite different from the old gospel hymn which invites us to proclaim, "Up from the grave he arose." Both refer to the same Christ. Both reference the resurrection of the Christ. Yet they speak quite differently about this event. One references a point in time, a moment from the past. The other suggests something present, even continuing indefinitely. He arose. He is risen.

Quite frankly, I don't much understand either one. I believe both statements are true. But to believe is not the same as to understand. And I don't understand much about the resurrection of Christ. Death is a concept I can begin to get my intellectual arms around. Resurrection puzzles me much more deeply.

I'm puzzled by Peter's assertion in today's reading from Acts: "The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead."

I'm puzzled by the description in the reading from John's Revelation where Jesus is described as "the first born from the dead."

I'm puzzled, as puzzled as Thomas was. I too need to see his hands and his feet, the wound in his side. And even then, though I might believe, surely still I would not understand.

Yet the Easter liturgy insistently greets us – Alleluia. Christ is risen.

The liturgical greeting on Easter day is not the only place where the resurrection of Christ is stated in the present tense. It also occurs in the Eucharistic liturgy, in companion with two other statements about Christ. In this liturgy we speak these words: "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again." And in the liturgy, this triad of brief statements about the Christ is called "the mystery of faith." In the Eucharistic liturgy we are invited to proclaim this mystery, to believe it in our hearts, and to speak it with our lips even though we may not fully understand it: We proclaim the mystery of faith: "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again."

The second of these statements is the one before us this Easter season. Christ is risen. We do not simply proclaim that he arose, we proclaim something much more profound—that he is risen. The statement proclaims that he arose, yes, but that he continues to live. And implied in this, is that he continues to live among us. Might it be that He lives with us? Might it be that He lives through us? How can this be, this mystery of faith?

To discover this Christ, who is risen and lives among us, travel with me to San Pedro Sula, Honduras. As the airplane descends from the sky and nears the landing field, the only thing we see out the window of the plane is row upon row of banana trees. The airport is located in the middle of the country's major fruit exporting region, and as the plane descends the fruit on the trees and the people tending them become more visible.

What makes this airport so different from others in Central America is the apparent peacefulness of its setting. The military is not evident; a few small planes on the side of the runway, perhaps, but no major military presence and no significant police force. The experienced traveler wonders whether we have landed in war-scared Central America or in a tropical paradise.

The thirty-minute bus ride into the city begins to tell the story. If peace is the absence of a visible military presence, then this is one of the more peaceful areas of Central America. If peace, however, embraces the absence of malnutrition, poverty, homelessness, illiteracy, and unemployment, then peace must be found elsewhere.

The city of San Pedro Sula is the economic heart of Honduras. Its history is agriculturally based; it is the center of the country's fruit exporting business. In this sense it is a nutritionist's and dieter's paradise—fresh fruit abounds. Yet the fruit in the local market pales by comparison to what is seen on the local plantation and to what is sold in the Whole Foods marketplace. Could it be that all the good fruit is taken from these people? Are they left only with the bruised and poorly formed remnants?

This is a divided city. The central plaza, with its fountain and gardens, represents the center of this division. The further one goes from the center, the more extended the division.

Going west from the plaza toward the mountains there is abundant wealth. Here the city streets are of smooth concrete, swept daily of debris. Here the homes are comfortable, if not elaborate, with watch dogs and security systems the order of the day. The closer one gets to the mountains, the safer one feels, the closer one is to economic well-being, and the more like an upper-middle class North American one becomes.

Going east, away from the mountains, there is profuse poverty. Here the city streets are of dirt and dust, wind-swept with garbage. Here the homes are shacks, made of scrap lumber if one is fortunate and of cardboard if one is not. Emaciated dogs urinate in the dust, but provide no security. The further one gets from the mountains, the greater one's sense of powerlessness, and the more strongly one feels the pangs of hunger.

The central plaza is the dividing line. On the four sides of the plaza are city hall, a first-class hotel, financial and commercial institutions, and—the cathedral. Here, quite clearly, the cathedral is challenged to give witness to the risen Christ. It is here that I participated in the celebration of mass one recent year, on the first Sunday after Epiphany; but it could just as well have been the second Sunday of Easter.

The physical setting is impressive. The building is a massive structure, Romanesque in style. The nave is lined with benches, filled with those who have come to worship. The aisles are crowded as well with people who cannot find a vacant place to sit. Over 2000 people attend this 9:00 a.m. mass. An equal number is likely to attend several other masses during the weekend.

In spite of its historic presence on the central plaza, the cathedral is dominated by its youthfulness. As the mass is about to begin, all the children present—hundreds of them—gather in the back of the sanctuary. When the processional moves forward through the nave, these children follow the acolytes and lead the priest to the altar. As the mass begins the children return to their places next to their families. But later in the mass when the "peace of the Lord" is extended, the movement of children occurs once again as they return to the altar and are there individually blessed by the priest. The cathedral nurtures its children because in them it recognizes the risen Christ.

Holy Scripture is central to the mission of the cathedral. The traditional lessons are read during the Liturgy of the Word. The homily is an expository sermon based on these lessons. The weekly cathedral periodical, "El Buen Amigo," distributed to each worshipper following the mass, includes a listing of the week's Daily Office Lectionary, and half of the paper's content is devoted to a commentary on the themes of these readings. The cathedral gathers around the Scriptures because therein it recognizes the risen Christ.

The witness of the Holy Spirit is present in the cathedral. The homily this day is on the baptism of Christ. What is central to the message, however, is that in baptism God's children are "sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever." As such, we are made free. The priest states, "We are freed from the imprisonment of sin as Noah was liberated from the waters of the flood and as the people of Israel were liberated from the waters of the Red Sea." As he brings the homily to an end, the priest invites the congregants to join in a time of meditation on what it means to be indwelt and made free by the Holy Spirit. The spontaneous, hearty round of applause which follows this meditation is indicative of the strength of the Spirit's ministry in the lives of these people. As the people are filled with the Holy Spirit they recognize the risen Christ.

During the celebration of the Eucharist, a member of the congregation goes to the lectern and reads aloud the list of goods—food, clothing, furniture, and cash—provided during the past week and then identifies how these goods were distributed throughout the city. Evangelism means bringing together, through the power of the Spirit, those who live to the west of the plaza with those who live to the east of the plaza. The cathedral works to erase the division between rich and poor, healthy and unhealthy, well-fed and malnourished, illiterate and educated, powerful and powerless—and in doing so, it recognizes the risen Christ.

Where this evangelism is found, the priest asserts, there "the risen Lord blesses his people with peace." This theme is visually present in the cathedral, displayed on six large, twelve-foot banners which hang along the nave. These banners serve as the congregational response to the Reading of the Word.

- Here in this city, where peace is yet to be found, the church ministers to its children, teaches Scripture, gives voice to the Spirit, and evangelizes in word and deed.
- Here in this city, where peace is yet to be found, the church believes God will bless the people with peace.
- Here in this city, where the cathedral sits in midst of a divided land, the church proclaims the mystery of faith.

Alleluia, Christ is risen.
The Lord is risen, indeed. Alleluia. Amen.