

***The Holy Eucharist with Reaffirmation of Baptismal & Ordination Vows, Blessing of Holy Oils***

***Sermon preached by the Very Reverend Peter Elliott DD, April 16, 2019***

Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." (John 12)

Do you find it interesting, as I do, that when, in John's gospel, Jesus speaks to his disciples just three days before his death, he speaks of it not reaching back to the Hebrew scriptures, but referencing the other great book of revelation, nature?

For, as St. Augustine wrote in *The City of God*:

Some people, in order to discover God, read books.

But there is a great book:

the very appearance of created things.

Look above you! Look below you!

Note it. Read it.

God, whom you want to discover,

never wrote that book with ink.

Instead God sets before your eyes

the things that God has made.

Can you ask for a louder voice than that?[1]

"Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain." With these words Jesus looks to nature to help the disciples and us begin to grasp the Paschal Mystery. Theologian Ronald Rolheiser describes the Paschal Mystery in this way, "...in order to come to fuller life and spirit we must constantly be letting go of present life and spirit." [2] That is to say that the Paschal Mystery is not just about what awaits us after we die, it is a way of living day by day following our Lord who himself died, and was raised up.

This is the dying and rising that we witness in nature; it is especially evident in the spring, when all that had died in forests and gardens springs up again, bursting through the ground with new life first leafing and then flowering into beauty.

The Paschal Mystery, the dying and rising that is the heart of the Christian way is what the church observes in Holy Week. We draw close to the dying as we reverently recall the death of Jesus of Nazareth, and after a pause, we celebrate the rising, the new life that God gives to Jesus in the resurrection. And we don't just tell the story: we act it out.

To act that out, at Easter, we baptize those who are drawn to Christ as young people or adults or by their families in infancy. And what else is baptism but acting out of this dying and rising? Church buildings equipped for full immersion see this enacted in a very tactile way with the baptismal candidate

going right down under the water and rising up, water dripping down their faces and bodies, as if they have been rescued from drowning, which, of course is the whole point: dying and rising!

We renew our baptismal promises on this day in holy week to remember that we have been brought from death into life through the sacrament of baptism; we have already been initiated into the Paschal Mystery.

Some of the baptized are called to serve as deacons, and in the journey to that vocation they experience the Paschal Mystery as their stance in the world changes from simply seeing the pain and agony of the world to approach it as a servant of Christ, offering ministry to those whose needs physical or spiritual are great but whose resources are poor. They invite them into regarding their life through the lens of the Paschal Mystery: when we are weak; then we are strong.

Still others of the baptized are called into the ministry of priesthood where we stand in community with those who seek to follow Jesus and unfold day by day and week by week the sacraments that tell of the Paschal Mystery—blessing the waters of baptism and the bread and wine of the holy communion. Through these elements of the natural world—water and bread and wine—in these simple sacramental acts we give expression to the Paschal Mystery that roots our lives in the reality of dying and rising.

Still others are called to oversee the work of ministry in an area; we call them bishops and they see the Paschal Mystery enacted every day as across a diocese the dying and rising is a daily occurrence in the lives of the clergy and the laity. Vocational questions, personal troubles, financial issues, health concerns, the constant change that is the life of the church is particularly visible to the episcopal order and those who work with them. The dying and the rising....

“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” Jesus said these words in John’s gospel after he was told that some Greeks wanted to see him. It must have been clear to him, in that moment, after the acclamation of the crowds on Palm Sunday that the journey he was about to make was for the whole world; not just for his own people. The Greeks represented foreigners, neither Roman nor Jewish—and fulfill, in John’s gospel the words that the Pharisees spoke in the verse just before today’s gospel section begins “Look: the world has gone after him.”

The world has indeed, and echoing the words of the Pharisees, Jesus, in the concluding verses of today’s gospel reading says “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” It is another of the great “I am” statements from John’s gospel—the great “I am” will be lifted up on the cross, a sign of dying and ultimately of the rising, the Paschal Mystery, this deep structure and reality of life not just for Jesus followers but for all human beings, known in nature, known in scripture, revealed in sacrament, and expressed through the ministry of the church.

And so on this day, the Tuesday of Holy Week, clergy and laity gather with our bishop to renew vows made in baptism and in ordination that link us together into this Paschal Mystery. We know what it means that in our lives there are many dyings and risings. My spiritual director, many years ago, said to me, “I wish you many little deaths.” And we have sensed that in deaths and disappointments that life brings that God is always in the business of bringing new life where we may well have given up hope.

I seek to start every workday with a plan of what I am going to get done. And over the course of that day other things happen. I used to find that really troubling, because there was “My” plan. I have come to see that that’s what God has put before me that day, and I need to let what I thought was important sometimes die in order to rise to the work God has given me.

And so we bless holy oils this day to remind us that the sacred is experienced in the events of our lives—the oil of Chrism—to anoint our baptisms, the oil of unction—administered in times of distress or illness, and the oil for the catechumens—given to those who are beginning their journey into Christ. Oil, another element of the earth, is blessed to convey the Paschal Mystery through the ministries of the church.

The Christian way compels us to be always looking at those places where the grain of wheat is dying so that we can be open to how God will bring new life. It’s why this journey of Holy Week is so rich: when we stand before the cross on Good Friday, we bring to that moment all that is unsettled in our lives, all the places where we grieve, all the places where we are confused, all the places that need healing in our world. Because it’s only there that we are fully aware of our need of the grace and resurrection power of God.

As, like many of you, I watched the spire of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris fall, yesterday, I was reminded of the hymn, “All my hope on God is founded” with the line, “though with care and toil we build them, tower and temple fall to dust. But God’s power, hour by hour, is our temple and our tower.”[3] God’s power, working in us, doing infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.

So wherever this Holy Week finds you, in the midst of the busyness of parish life or in the struggles that just are a part of what it means to be alive, know this: the Paschal Mystery, the dying and rising that it expresses, is the deepest truth that exists. It’s paradox and it’s the hope that is at the heart of the Christian way. It is manifest in the book of nature, it is witnessed to in the Holy Scriptures, it was acted out in Jesus, it is the central image of the Gospel, incarnate in the work of ministry. May God bless us all in our dyings and in our risings so that may we always walk as children of the light.

Amen.

[1] As cited in Franciscan Friar’s George Corrigan OFM blog  
<https://friarmusings.wordpress.com/2012/03/21/the-book-of-nature-and-the-book-of-the-word/>

[2] Ronald Rolheiser *The Holy Longing: The Search for A Christian Spirituality*. New York: Doubleday, 1999, see Chapter 7

[3] <http://www.pateys.nf.ca/cgi-bin/lyrics.pl?hymnnumber=462>