

a homily given by
The Right Reverend Robert O'Neill, Bishop of Colorado
at Saint John's Cathedral, Denver
on Easter Day, 4 April 2010

"Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?'"

—*John 20:15*

Here's a statistic I encountered recently. Did you know that only about seventy percent of church-going Americans understand that Easter is a religious holiday? Amazing, isn't it? But even more curiously, did you know that only about forty-five percent of church-goers will identify Easter as a celebration of Jesus' resurrection? How about that? The numbers come from a reputable research group using appropriate survey methodologies, and the maximum sampling error they say represents only about a three percent margin.¹ But still it is really a bit startling—particularly to those of us who are rather immersed in the religious life of the Church—to think that only a minority of the community of the faithful actually understand that Easter is about the resurrection.

I am sure, of course, that those statistics are not likely to apply to this particular congregation. But even as I wish you all a very happy and holy Easter this morning, and without wanting to cause any offense, I do want to be sure that we are all on the same page. So let me just say it. Today, this Easter Day, we celebrate an absolute miracle. We claim a divine gift. We name the deepest reality of life itself. We call it resurrection.

You would think that for those who witnessed it firsthand, Jesus' resurrection must have been so overwhelming, so patently obvious, so dramatically overpowering as to be completely clear and absolutely unmistakable—a kind of non-negotiable experience as it were. But that is not the story that the gospels tell. Peter and another disciple race to the tomb and find it empty, but as John tells us they do not understand what they see. They cannot connect it either to their own human experience nor can they interpret it theologically in relationship to the scripture they know. Mary Magdalene, in the same story, stands outside the empty tomb weeping. She actually sees the risen Jesus. She has conversation with him. She is given the vision, but she remains uncomprehending. She mistakes Jesus for the gardener. Matthew tells us at the end of his gospel that while some worship the risen Christ on the mountain top, others in that same moment actually doubt. Luke tells stories in which the disciples either don't recognize the resurrected Jesus or think him to be a ghost. Mark's gospel ends chillingly with the statement that the disciples "said nothing to any one for they were afraid."² In yet another account, the disciples simply dismiss the possibility of the resurrection, considering it to be an "idle tale."³ It is quite a collection of responses to the resurrection that we find in the

¹ The Barna Group, March 15, 2010

² Mark 16.8. In spite of the remaining portions of Mark's gospel found in current editions of the Bible, most scholars believe that Mark's gospel ended originally ended with verse 8.

³ Luke 24.12

gospels—amazement, astonishment, terror, confusion, mistaken identify, perplexity, fear, doubt, trembling silence, running away.

Let's be clear. This is how the gospels end—not with a neat and tidy resolution but every one of them with an alarming and challenging open-endedness. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John make it quite clear that those who witness the resurrection must sit with it, puzzle over it, wonder about it, struggle with it, pray with it, long for it, avoid it, misunderstand it, and learn over time how to appropriate and integrate this new experience, this new understanding of reality, into their own lives. This is the proclamation of the resurrection offered to us by the early Christian community—not a conclusive statement to be passively received and politely filed away but a proclamation, a boldly provocative statement about a deep and amazing reality of life that invites our ongoing attention and our most thoughtful and considered response.

This kind of misapprehension, this inability to understand and move where Jesus would lead the way, is not new territory for the disciples either. It is a familiar pattern. Even those attracted from the beginning to the new possibilities revealed in Jesus are regularly drawn back into old patterns of behavior. They are repeatedly reluctant to move from where they are. They consistently have difficulty keeping up. Even those who long for the new vision offered by Jesus still can't help but see the world through the old lens of conventional wisdom. It was true for the disciples then, and it is true for us now. We know all too well the very real problems of our day—starvation, disease, poverty, violence, gross economic injustice here and abroad, brittlely entrenched politics, religiously justified wars, and so on. We know the need even without naming it. But even in a world crying out desperately for real change, we stand today in the same dangerous position as the first disciples, and like them we opt more frequently than not simply to be carried along by the inertia of the familiar.

There it is. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. And disciples across the ages have struggled to move into the reality of that new and divine life.

Our Holy Week preacher, Herbert O'Driscoll, has made reference this past week to such literary figures as T.S. Eliot, Mary Oliver, and William Shakespeare. This morning, however, I thought that I would draw from another literary source—the sacred library of country-western music. I think of that song by Kenny Chesney called “Everybody Wants to Go to Heaven.” It's on his album *Lucky Old Sun* (and yes, I am a fan). There are in this song all the mandatory references to hard living, women and whiskey, and carrying on all night—all the things you would expect. There is in this song the obligatory preacher offering the obligatory warnings to the woefully underdeveloped male character. The preacher asks the question, “Son, don't you want to hear him call your name when you're standing at the pearly gates.” And the answer? “I told the preacher, ‘Yes I do, but I hope he don't call today.’” And then there is the chorus which says it all: “Everybody wants to go to heaven, get their wings and fly around; Everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to go now.”

Let me be the first to point out what is theologically incorrect with that. Contrary to the cultural Christianity of our day, the Christian faith and life is not about working hard to get a great reward. The Christian faith and life at its core never has been, and never will be, about appeasing a capricious God. The Christian faith and life is not even remotely about trying to negotiate some cosmic system of reward and punishment. Instead, the Christian faith and life is simply this: it is choosing to know love in order to become love. I will say that again: the Christian faith and life is about choosing to know love completely in order to become love completely.

That means that the Christian faith and life involves choice *and* change, thoughtful and consistent attention *and* deep inner transformation. That is where Kenny Chesney does have it right. Everybody does want to go to heaven. We all know within ourselves something of the absolute preciousness and wonder of this life, and we cherish it. We all recognize and sense and experience within ourselves something of the absolute miracle, the pure gift, of just being alive, and we try in different ways to hold on to it. We all long to know that love that is indeed the source of all that is. That is every human heart's deepest desire, spoken or unspoken, recognized or not. But we are at the same time deeply ambivalent because love in all its fullness is still unfamiliar territory, and knowing love, becoming love, requires not only choice but change, not only attention but transformation, and there is always something risky in making that move. Sure, everybody wants to go to heaven, but we don't necessarily want to go right now. It's like Augustine of Hippo found himself saying back in the fourth century before his conversion to Christianity, at that time when he wrestled with the futility of his own life, a time in which he longed for something different but knew his own reluctance to move in new way. "Lord, save me," he prayed, "but not right now."

Our own ambivalence to love is inevitably an obstacle that we all encounter on the spiritual journey.

So let's go back to where this Holy Week began—to Palm Sunday, the Sunday of the Passion. You know the story. The crowds welcome Jesus as he enters Jerusalem, scattering palms along the way and hailing him as the son of David, the long awaited messiah, and just as enthusiastically and with stunning rapidity the same crowds call for his death. That is it. That is the proscenium arch, as it were, that frames the stage for the drama that unfolds during that week. There we see three figures—Jesus, Pilate, and Barabbas—standing in front of a crowded mass of humanity, and there we hear one question: "What do you want?" That is what Pilate asks the crowd. "What do you want? Do you want me to release Jesus, this man in whom I can find no fault? Or do you want me to release Barabbas, a criminal and murderer?" Really. He puts the question to the crowd, "What do you want?"

Pilate, of course, is a pragmatist motivated by a need to calm the political tensions in the city. He wants to keep his job and retain his power. But there is far more significance to his question than even he knows. The issue before this crowd, this spectrum of humanity, is this: "What do you want? Do you want the divine life, the love, that is here, right now, in this place, already among you, already fully a part of your

humanity? Do you want that? Or do you want something else, another humanity, a humanity that is known by its inevitably destructive tendencies, known by its deadly decisions with deadly consequences, a humanity robbed, quite literally, of its divine dignity? Well? What do you want?"

That's the question. It is the same question that the risen Jesus puts to Mary as she stands weeping outside the tomb. "Whom are you seeking?" he asks. "What do you want?" It is the same open-ended question that is always before us daily, always inviting, indeed begging, our attention and care daily. What do *you* want, really?

That is the very question that was before Jesus at the beginning of his ministry and remains before Jesus even as he stands with Pilate and Barabbas facing the crowd. It is Jesus, of course, who reveals the way. From the beginning and in the end, even in the face of overwhelming political and religious power, Jesus gives himself totally, completely, unconditionally, without exception, equivocation or qualification to the vision of the real kingdom, and in so doing he reveals something absolutely amazing about our life. Simply this: that when we give ourselves to love, love is multiplied; and when we give ourselves to love completely, love is multiplied completely. This is the divine economy, the deep and abiding truth of your life and mine. When we give ourselves to love, love is multiplied. When we give ourselves to love completely, love is multiplied completely. This we call resurrection.

My friends, in the beauty of our liturgy, in the poetry of our hymnody, in the mystery of sacrament that is ours today, it is not an abstract theological or philosophical proposition that we are teeing up to die a slow death of a thousand qualifications. It is instead a simple and challenging proclamation that invites our thoughtful and courageous response.

Today we celebrate a miracle. We claim a gift. We name the deepest reality of your life and mine—that when the veil is parted, that when our humanity is fully and divinely revealed, if we dare to look, we will to see something both precious and glorious about ourselves: that from the beginning and in the end it is all about love and that love always has and always will prevail.

Because of this we do say, "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again." Because of this we can say, from the very depth of our being, "Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia."

—*Amen.*