

Easter Sunday – Cycle C
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – April 21, 2019
Reverend Robert W. Marshall, Jr., Pastor

I grew up in St. Michael's parish. Our pastor for many years was Father Francis McRedmond. Father Mac was a brilliant man who almost always had a smile on his very red face. There may be very few things you could count on in life, but when you arrived at St. Michael's you could depend upon hearing Father Mac's voice, "Well," he always said, "what brings you here?" Sometimes the question made sense – and so I would reply, "I've come for choir rehearsal, Father" or "for a scout meeting," or "I just wanted to make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament." At other times, like when you were walking in the door just before Mass began, the question, "What brings you here?" seemed a little foolish. "I'm coming to Mass, Father." It wasn't until I got older that I realized how profound the question actually is.

In today's gospel, we hear a variation on Father McRedmond's question, "What brings you here?" The two men in dazzling garments who appeared to the women at the tomb asked, "Why do you seek the living one among the dead?" At first blush, both questions seem rather ridiculous – isn't it obvious why I'm here? What do you mean the living one – we laid Jesus in this tomb last Friday after his crucifixion. But these two men – these two angels, one presumes – were challenging the women at the tomb, challenging us to think about what we are doing. Those women, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and the other Mary, went to the tomb with spices to anoint the body of Jesus. He had been entombed in haste before the Passover Sabbath began. There had been no time to attend to such details – so at the first opportunity – at daybreak on the day after the Sabbath – the women went to carry out their final ministry to Jesus. He had given them such hope – surely, they could spend a little time anointing his body in the tomb. They knew why they came. But the angels reminded them of Jesus' own words – the Son of Man will rise on the third day. Had they forgotten what he said? Had they misunderstood his words? Did the brutality of the crucifixion shake their faith? "Why do you seek the living one among the dead?" the angels asked. Did they dare to believe that their beloved teacher, their crucified Lord was truly living and not dead?

At this Easter celebration, with everyone dressed in finery, with flowers filling our sanctuary, with the deep violet of Lent and the red of Holy Week replaced by the gold and white and springtime colors of Easter, what brings you here? Do you come in search of the living or of the dead? Have you come to rejoice at the empty tomb or to visit a grave? These may seem like strange questions – but they are important ones. You see, each Sunday people gather in Christian churches for a true encounter with the risen Christ. We recognize his presence in the community, in the Scriptures, in the priesthood, and in the Eucharist. We come each week to be nourished and sustained, to be refreshed and strengthened. Many have come here to seek the living God. And each Sunday, as well – and especially on Easter and Christmas and Mothers' Day and those other times when families gather – each Sunday people come to Mass out of habit or to please their mom or to stroll down memory lane or just to visit old friends and remember the good times. In a

sense, they come not to meet the living God, but to lay flowers on the tomb of their faith – out of respect, perhaps, or out of fear.

We were reminded of that this past week as we watched the Cathedral of Notre Dame burn in Paris. Crowds gathered outside weeping and singing and a few of them were actually praying. News reporters informed us that the great Cathedral is a major tourist attraction, a French landmark, steeped in history, an architectural marvel, with priceless art and artifacts and stained glass and a marvelous pipe organ. And one news anchor actually said, “And they still have a Sunday Mass there.” “How quaint,” you can hear them saying, “those Catholics are still worshipping in a museum.” You get the sense, do you not, that most of those gathered were mourning the loss of art and architecture and history rather than wondering where they would practice their lively faith. From time to time, all of us fall into this category – coming to Church motivated more by respect than by faith. None of us have completely pure intentions. Sometimes we do indeed come to this Cathedral for a privileged encounter with the risen Christ, for a connection with the host of heaven. And, yes, sometimes we come more out of habit or memory or obligation or fear, we come to pay lip service to a faith we never fully embraced or which we no longer practice. And all of us come burdened by the frustrations of daily life – by the sadness or the pain, the confusion and the helplessness and the loneliness that characterize our society. Each of us was brought here by a different combination of reasons and feelings and emotions, so for most of us the question “What brings you here?” does not have an easy answer.

Brought together by so many different motives, we stand with one another on this holy ground – in the shadow of a cross still stained with blood, in the silence of an empty tomb – with minds that cannot fully comprehend and hearts that are easily overwhelmed. Whatever brought us here burns away like the morning dew. The power of the resurrection can do that. If we open our eyes and our minds and our hearts to the risen Christ, then everything else will fade away. Whatever fear death holds for us will be shattered by the hope of eternal life that Christ’s resurrection offers us. Whatever complacency may have crept into our lives, whatever sadness or loneliness or heartache we have learned to live with, whatever obligations of our career or our social circle burden us and lay claim to our time – everything can be swept away by the power of Easter. A God who loves us enough to bring life out of death surely loves us enough to bring hope and joy into your life and mine. That is the promise of Easter – in the overwhelming power of the resurrection, nothing is as bad as it seems – and true, lasting joy is not only possible, it is real. Earlier this week, as we prepared for the Chrism Mass, some of my brother priests reminded me of how often, like Father McRedmond, I suppose, I say the same thing – usually without even thinking about it. No matter what the problem or the proposed solution, I will frequently remark: “We live in hope.” That hope comes from the resurrection. That hope is made manifest in this Easter celebration. No matter what joys or sorrows, memories or fears brought you here today – even if you came only to visit the dead, I pray that you encounter the living God, that you encounter the risen Christ. Too many people live in sadness and pain. In the light of the resurrection, we Christians live in hope. Alleluia!