

[Readings: Ezekiel 37:12-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:8-11; John 11:1-45]

Are you feeling "dead on your feet?" So did the Jewish people in the time of the prophet of our First Reading, Ezekiel. So did the people listening to Paul in today's Second Reading. So did Martha and Mary and Lazarus in our Gospel.

Those who had appeared banished from the land of the living would be called forth from their graves of slavery and bondage of the Babylonian captivity, and each would begin to live again the life that seemed lost forever. John does not tell us in today's Gospel if the restoration of Lazarus from death to life brought an awakening of faith in the people witnessing this miracle. For some, it did.

Some interpret this Gospel not as the literal resuscitation of Lazarus, but of the spiritual re-awakening of the Jewish people who were lagging in their faith. I myself felt this story was a test of my own faith. If Jesus Christ is believed to be the first to be raised from the dead, how come Jesus is raising people left and right? The answer: We need to remember that these people who are resuscitated will die again. Jesus Christ, once Risen from the dead in glory, will never die again. THAT'S the difference! And WHAT a difference that is!

So, are you "dead on your feet?" Are you feeling indifferent, or bored or lazy or in doubt? Do you find yourself being swept away by "fleshly" ways of thinking? One that is shaped and controlled by the values and standards of a world in rebellion against God? Then you're still in the tomb! A "spirited" existence is one that is surrendered to God, to grace, and to the action of the Spirit of God who dwells within. Have you found that power, that grace yet?

This is what Christian Stewardship does. It recharges the batteries. It gives insight into who we are, how we got here, what our purpose is in life, and what to do with what we have when we love God and believe in God.

Here is a theme to each of my stewardship homilies so far this Lent, in the form of a question. Imagine each of you asking me these questions. The First Sunday of Lent: What exactly is stewardship? The Second Sunday of Lent: How do I "do stewardship" in my state in life: as a single person, as a married person, as a consecrated religious, or as an ordained person?

The Third Sunday of Lent: What is the connection between stewardship and my prayer life? The Fourth Sunday of Lent: Where does my commitment to my family fit in with stewardship as a spouse, a parent, a child, a sibling, a grandparent? Can you picture yourself asking these questions?

Now, here is the real challenging question, and no one has asked me in 35 years of priesthood: Father, what do I as a responsible steward, do with my money and my material possessions? "Lemme tell ya!" If we want God to touch every aspect of our lives in relationships and in spirituality, we also want to invite God into the dollars and cents of our lives.

Almsgiving is donating money or goods or services to the poor. It is a witness to fraternal charity and a work of justice that is pleasing to God. Here is what the Book of Tobit says:

"Give alms from your possessions. Do not turn your face away from any of the poor, and God's face will not be turned away from you. Give alms in proportion to what you own. If you have great wealth, give alms out of your abundance: if you have but little, distribute even some of that. But do not hesitate to give alms; you will be storing up a godly treasure for yourself against the day of adversity. Almsgiving frees one from death, and keeps one from going into the dark abode. Alms are a worthy offering in the sight of the Most High for all who give them." (Tob. 4:7-11) Do you struggle to give alms? If so, why?

I am proud to say that as your pastor, I only talk about money from the pulpit once or twice a year: when I give my "State of the Parish" address, and when it's time for the Catholic Services Appeal. Right? Amen? Any parishioner who says different, doesn't come to church here every Sunday!

Our financial and material support of the Church and charities comes from first and foremost from a deep sense of gratitude. We acknowledge that everything we have comes from God. We admit that we have to give back to others, as God has given to us. And we realize that God can never, never be outdone in generosity.

There are two stories which come to mind about financial stewardship.

The first is from the reality that Jesus Christ Himself did not begin His religious and spiritual life as a Roman Catholic. He was a nice Jewish boy with observant Jewish parents. Someone once described God the Father as a very good Jewish agent. He gets us things: a job, food to eat, a car to drive, a roof over our head. A beautiful religious tradition and faith practice. God even makes sure we have family, friends and co-workers. And as a good Jewish "Agent," He wants His ten percent! We get to keep 90%. Such a deal!

The other story is about my pastor in the last parish where I was an associate pastor. He asked me if I give 10% of my income to God through my parish, through my participation in the CSA and to charity. I remember vividly saying, "I give God my very life every day. What MORE does He want?" Without missing a beat, the pastor said, "10% of what's in your wallet! It's in the Bible! There are at least 17 biblical passages that deal with giving ten percent to God."

Then he said, "Nick, I would not ask the parishioners here or you to do something I myself would not do. I tithe. And I have never been more blessed in my life. The more I give, the more the Lord gives to me."

I can testify to that. When I think I am being generous in giving to this parish, to the CSA or to charity, when I think I may be giving too much to an individual who needs assistance, within days, God gives me a financial blessing of equal or more value! God can never, never be outdone in charity!

I want to show you a pie chart, thanks to the creative skills of Dan Heileman and Zora Dziurman. Let's take a look at it. The entire circle or pie represents 100% of what God has given to us and continues to give to us. All of this belongs to God. See all the green? That represents what you get to keep -- 90% -- and spend as you like: on your bills, on your food, clothing and shelter, on your education, recreation, on your entertainment and on your favorite sports.

The American bishops then ask that you take 5% of the remaining 10% -- the blue slice -- and donate it to your parish: St. Martin de Porres Parish.

Quick math: does your financial support of your parish equal this percentage? Fifteen days before Federal Income Tax Day, someone asked, "Are we talking gross income or net income?" I tell them, "Start with net. I'll take net!"

Every July 1, when I am informed what my annual compensation will be for the next fiscal year, I look at the bottom line figure. I make a prayer of thanksgiving and then I say, "Lord, 10% is yours, right off the top!"

The next slice – the purple one -- is 4%. That's how much we are asked to give to our favorite charities. This is separate from our church support. And do not, I repeat, do not feel at all guilty that you cannot support the 150 charity pleas you get through the mail throughout the year, especially before Thanksgiving, Christmas and during Lent. Select three or four or five or ten favorite charities and leave it at that. Vet the charity. That's what I do. How much of my gift actually goes to the cause, to those in need, and how much is for administrative costs? The rest of the pleas go into the recycle bin.

See the almost invisible red slice? That's for the Catholic Services Appeal. 1% of your income. It's the smallest slice you can have before you have to get into fractions. Is 1% too much to ask to support our Mother Church? Charity begins at home, yes, but it must extend to the larger Church.

If everyone who attends Mass regularly followed this simple 10% tithing invitation and challenge of financial giving, sacrificing 5% to the parish, 4% to favorite charities and 1% to the CSA, we could triple the amount of parish services we provide for you, we would always make our annual CSA parish target, and any child who wanted to attend a Catholic grade school or high school could do so because the parish would pay for it! This is happening in Catholic parishes all around the country. This is the spiritual result of responsible sacrificial giving in a Catholic stewardship parish!

I give personal witness and testify to you that I have been committed to sacrificial giving – tithing – for almost twenty-five years.

Since then, on my meager income of \$35,000 a year, plus benefits, I have been able to assist my family financially, and paid for the first two years of my niece's college education. Because of the generosity of God through parishioners who gift me at weddings, baptisms and funerals. Who gift me on my birthday, anniversary of ordination and at Christmas. And you know, I give back to God even 10% of that!

The concept of tithing must begin in our heart, move to our brain, and find expression in our wallet. If everyone here made the same amount of sacrifice by percentage, it would mean an equal sacrifice on everybody's part. But I am on a fixed income. But I am on welfare. The call, the invitation is still there for your sacrifice. My pastor told the story about his grandfather who came to America from Sicily. He was a common laborer – what we would call a blue collar worker. Every week or two weeks when he got paid in cash, he brought it home and went to the kitchen where there were three labelled jars. The first jar said, "CHURCH." The second jar said, "BILLS." The last jar said, "FUN." Most weeks, the paycheck went only in the first two jars. There is a humble lesson to learn there.

When we give out of our need, like the Gospel story of the Widow's Mite, we experience a spiritual transformation. Sacrificial giving puts God first, not last. God deserves our First Fruits, not our Left Overs!

Let the Holy Spirit fill you with a spirit of joyful gratitude for what you have. Sacrificial giving is deliberately planned. It has a bite. It means sacrifice.

How much should we give? Here is the ideal. I ask only that you take it to prayer. Let the Holy Spirit tell you to start with a percentage, not a dollar amount. You giving \$20 a week and me giving \$20 means something different. But you giving 5% and me giving 5% means the same amount of sacrifice, but not the same dollar amount. And together we become a stewardship parish.

So, in what ways are you and I still "dead on our feet?" What are some ways that we are still "bound" and need to be set free? What are some wrappings others have put on us? What are the wrappings we have put on ourselves? Are WE ready to step out of the tomb and into the light? AMEN!

[Readings: Isaiah 50:4-7; Psalm 22; Philippians 2:6-11; Matt 26:14-27:66]

Things aren't always what they seem. We are told to go by "First Impressions" but first impressions of people usually fail when we get to know the other person more deeply. It's easy to see how our First Reading from Isaiah is seen as prophetic: surely we see in the so-called "Suffering Servant" a prediction of what will happen with the arrival of Jesus Christ centuries later.

Things aren't what they seem. You have life all figured out. You are reasonably happy, and all is going relatively well. Then the trauma happens. The disease. The car accident. The violent crime. The bad news. And then it's like taking a cannonball to the stomach. That's how St. Paul expresses the "emptying out" of Jesus when He lowers Himself to become one of us, and when he is raised up on the cross of Calvary. Like a cannonball in the gut.

Things aren't what they seem. Every year I see you come up for the adoration of the cross on Good Friday and every year I weep with you and for you. Because some of you have chosen to share the burden of your crosses with me. And I take that weight and place it at the foot of Calvary with my own crosses. And they are changed. Those crosses are redeemed in ways to redeem the suffering in our lives.

What is the biggest cross in your life right now? What is the greatest suffering you are enduring? I ask YOU to fill in the blank. Then I ask you to make that cross redemptive. How do you do that? You say, "Lord Jesus, crucified, I offer this cross, its suffering and its pain, to Your cross. I fill up what is lacking in Your sufferings by making MY sufferings a part of it." To put it more simply, say, "Lord, my cross is Your cross and Yours is mine, for the salvation of the world."

Then that cross will not be what it seems. It will be the means through which you and I will be saved. Because we have invited the Lord Jesus Christ to share that cross with us. Because in offering it up with the Holy Cross of Jesus Christ, we make that cross have meaning. Because you know that the story of the Cross does not end with humiliation and failure on a forsaken instrument of death. Because things aren't what seem. They all will change in one week! AMEN!

[Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14; Psalm 116; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 12:1-15]

Before entering the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D. C., visitors pass by a prominent sign that reads, "Think about what you saw." Far from merely being a catchy slogan, the sign is a call to action. "Think about what you saw" calls visitors to remember the past and let it shape the future. In that way, the Holocaust Museum remains a LIVING memorial, a means to preserve the memory of the victims, while calling this and future generations out of passivity and into action.

Tonight's First Reading gives us all the essentials of the Passover or Seder Meal. Among the many striking features of the Seder are two. The first is the "NOW" of the Passover Meal. Orthodox Jews do not simply remember what happened in the past. Speaking the words of what happened in the past makes the action real in the PRESENT. They are not merely remembering the Passover -- they ARE doing the Passover right now!

The words of their prayers speak of this: "Let all who ARE hungry come and eat. Let all who ARE in need come and celebrate Passover... This year we ARE slaves: next year we are free!" Secondly, the dismissal at the end of the Passover meal ends with the well-known words: "Next year in Jerusalem!" It speaks of the hope that one day all will return to the mother land -- or better put -- the Holy Land. Some think this will happen at Armageddon. We believe otherwise. When the Church is united at last, all will be "in Jerusalem."

Tonight, we gather to celebrate the Supper of the Lord, a living memorial that puts us smack dab into the present moment of our lives. Like our Jewish ancestors, we simply do not remember and retell the story: In speaking the words, we are in the PRESENT MOMENT of the REAL PRESENCE: "This IS my Body... This IS my blood." "Do this (NOW) in remembrance of Me."

As Moses received his instructions from his God, we receive our instructions, and our shipping out orders from Jesus Christ Himself. Those orders come from the words found in tonight's Gospel: "I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should do also."

Jesus, John tells us, knew that His hour had come to pass from this world to the Father. He loved His own in the world and He loved them to the end. He was fully aware of what was going to happen in the next twenty-four hours. He sheds the signs of prestige and position in society, and washes the feet of His disciples. Are you aware, my friends, that you are in this awesome mystery NOW? From the moment you walked into this holy place and sat yourself within these hallowed walls, you put yourselves into the middle of this holy mess!

You come to the Supper of the Lord with tired eyes and weary bodies. You come with your genuine concerns and cares about work, or the lack of it; health, or the lack of it; love, or the lack of it. You come to the table of the Supper of the Lord, in Word and in Sacrament, to be inspired, to be given hope, to be nourished. And then, like our pilgrim ancestors in Egypt, you are ready to leave this place at a moment's notice.

And where are you headed? When you receive the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ, you receive it not from me, but from Him in Whose place I stand as an "Alter Christus" -- "Another Christ." As Jesus handed a morsel of bread to Judas Iscariot, who turned traitor, and to Peter, who denied Him, and to the other ten seated around Him, Jesus Christ hands you His very Self for your nourishment and strength. For your peace. For your salvation.

Think about what you saw. Think about what you see here tonight. Let that guide you to where you are headed. To betrayal and to denial, or to fraternal love, ministry and service. Let us leave here tonight, fully aware of what is going to happen to us, or totally without a clue, letting Jesus Christ guide us to wash some feet. The feet of those who have lost their homes and jobs. The feet of those who are mentally or physically challenged. To wash the feet of those who are broken and broken-hearted, or who are strangers and aliens in our land.

This, we will learn, is the ultimate meaning of the Eucharist. To become the hands and feet, the eyes and the ears, the mouth and the heart of the Lord in the world. AMEN!

[Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 31; Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9; John 18:1-19:42]

In spite of many crosses and struggles throughout my life, our dear Lord has blessed me with two spiritual experiences that can only be described as intense, awesome, and totally Other. The first was on my seminary retreat, which I will share with you now. The other was on my ordination day, which I will share with you on my 35th anniversary weekend in May.

The first experience was the most powerful experience of the presence of God in my life and centers around what we have just experienced: the crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ, and the “surprise ending” to the story which God delivered as an awesome “punchline!”

It was back in 1980, when I and my seminarian classmates were on a retreat prior to our ordination as transitional deacons in the Church. We had left the security of the seminary building to go to the motherhouse of the Divine Word Fathers outside the city. The building was cold and dark, its interior illuminated by a sparse line of bare light bulbs. At night, it looked like a prison, and the only light in the chapel was focused on the tabernacle.

One night, a group of us were in the chapel, praying in our own way and asking God to give some sign of confirmation for what we were about to do the following week. I looked with envy at those sitting around me who obviously were communing with God while I felt nothing inside. There was the “Budding Buddhist,” the fellow sitting in the Lotus Position, palms turned upward and a smile of utter bliss on his face. There was the “Headless Horseman,” the fellow with his head bowed so low that from the back, it seemed that his head disappeared above his shoulders.

I looked at the tabernacle and I asked, “Lord, what about ME? When am I going to experience you Up Close and Personal?” And then I received a shocking answer: “You want to experience me? Walk slowly to your room. I will let you experience me.” In an instant, the chapel became the Garden of Gethsemane. I could feel the cool spring breeze and hear the sounds of nighttime critters around me. I got up from my chair and left the chapel.

I headed back to my room. Only I wasn't walking in a dark hallway and staircase; I was walking to the home of the high priest Caiphas. The marble steps I ascended became the stairs of the Praetorium, and my room became my jail cell. I entered my room and closed my eyes.

The Spirit prompted me to lay on my back on the floor of my room. Somehow, I had fast-forwarded from Holy Thursday night right to Golgotha, to Calvary. I was stripped of my clothes and thrown onto the horizontal beam of my cross. I could feel the wood splinters enter my arms and my head ached tremendously from a crown of thorns. I looked up as a Roman Centurion reached for my right arm. I thought he was offering his hand to help me up, and when I reached for his hand, he grabbed my wrist, thrust it back onto the wooden plank, and smashed a railroad spike through my wrist.

The pain was indescribable. I looked into the eyes of the Roman Centurion with shock and surprise and absolute fear when I saw him reach for my left hand, and he smashed another railroad spike into my left wrist. I felt my body tacked onto the horizontal beam of my cross being lifted up, and what breath was still in my lungs blew out of them with a force. Hanging on the cross, I could see people below me, but I couldn't make out any faces. Just anonymous people walking past, some looking up and most looking away. Some crying.

When I could endure no more, I gave out a loud cry and bowed my head. Again, in an instant, I felt my soul descending lower and lower into what seemed to be a well. The area around me was pitch black, but it felt neither cold nor damp. Just totally dark. I had the sensation of falling lower and lower until my soul came to a gentle stop. I could see nothing, but all I could hear was a strong deep voice saying, "I am with you. I am with you. I am with you." A great peace filled my heart. The moment I understood the message given to me by my Jesus, my soul began to soar upward, as if I was on an express elevator. My soul returned to my body and I shook awake. When I opened my eyes, I realized that I was back in my room at the retreat center.

It was still night. A little over an hour had passed. And I smiled.

I took that divine message and had those four beautiful words inscribed at

the base of my chalice. So that each time I celebrate Mass, each time I lift up the cup of salvation, I see the words my God, my Jesus, spoke to me and still speaks to me: "I am with you... I am with you... I am with you..."

This is the message of Good Friday. Whatever cross we bear we do not bear alone. Whether that cross is the cross of physical, mental, emotional or spiritual distress. Whether that cross is one of rejection, isolation or loneliness. Whether that cross is one of doubt, anxiety or fear. Whether that cross is one of abuse, abandonment or addiction.

Take up that cross. Die on that cross. Be consumed by that cross. And let that cross bring you closer to the crucified Christ.

Bring that cross to the wood of the cross which we will adore in a few moments. Nail your cross to the Holy Cross of Jesus Christ.

And as you enter that dark and warm sacred place where you are totally alone with God, let God say a sacred and personal Word to you. And let your Jesus walk with you from that cross to the tomb and to the Resurrection which we will celebrate on Sunday.

We adore You O Christ, and we bless You,

Because by Your Holy Cross, You have redeemed the world... and me!

AMEN!

[Genesis 1:1-2:2; Psalm 104; Exodus 14:15-15:1; Exodus 15:1-6, 17-18; Isaiah 55:1-11; Isaiah 12:2-6; Romans 6:3-11; Matthew 28:1-10]

Our beautiful Easter Vigil is always a feast for the senses.

We SEE the light of the Christ Candle, the Easter Candle, and the Paschal Candle penetrating the darkness of the night, the darkness of sin and the darkness of death. We SEE the sanctuary decorations move from the starkness of Lenten desert to the life of a lush garden.

We HEAR the wonderful Exultet and the vivid Bible accounts of salvation history. We HEAR the bells, the Gloria, the Alleluias.

We SMELL the incense and the Holy Chrism of those who are to be confirmed tonight.

We FEEL the water poured over us or sprinkled upon us as a reminder of our participation in the life, death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Finally, we TASTE what once was bread and wine and is now the very and true Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ. Our ritual prayer is very sensual, earthy.

All of our sensory experiences of this most holy night remind us that we are a people, a church, of hope. Because we know that Christ has defeated sin and death, we believe that His victory has meaning and purpose for us.

Christ is truly Risen! For you. For me. For all of humanity. In one sense, we climb the mountain of the Lord and are transformed -- transfigured -- by what we do here tonight. Perhaps that's why churches were built so beautifully decades and centuries ago -- to remind us that here we enter a church, we walk on holy ground, and that here is the only place where we will ever be the closest to God this side of Heaven. When we come to the table of the Lord.

My friends, Easter reminds us that we should not only take all of these images IN, we should also take them OUT. "Come and see," yes, then "Go and tell!" We do this somewhat fearful, but also overjoyed! For that is what we celebrate tonight. That Christ is Risen and has given us a Spirit-guided Church as His farewell gift to us. This community is truly Spirit-fed and Spirit-led!

Whenever we gather to celebrate the Eucharist, our task here is only half-done. What we profess HERE is now to be taken out THERE. You and I, nourished by Word and Sacrament, become living tabernacles and walking icons of the reality that Jesus Christ is alive and well and working in our hearts, in our lives and in the homes and the cities of those who believe in Him. When we step out of church, we step into ministry.

And now, a word to our three elect and five candidates for ongoing conversion. Did you think that one day, you would be here about to do what you are about to do? What was the reaction of your family, your friends, and your co-workers when you told them that you are going to become a full-fledged Roman Catholic? An answer to prayers? Half-overjoyed and half-fearful?

What did Isaiah say in our Reading tonight? “My thoughts are not your thoughts nor are My ways your ways.” For most of us, our journey of faith is not a straight line from Point A to Point B but has a lot of zigzags in it, right? And we take comfort in the words that, as the rain does not return to the clouds until it has fulfilled its purpose, so His Word will not return to Him until it has accomplished what God wants to accomplish in you.

Be open to His Word. Be open to His Will.

And for all of us, may the love our Lord showed for the world at Easter bring His joy to your heart, His peace to your spirit and His holy light to your life.
ALLELUIA! AMEN!

[Readings: Acts 10:34a, 37-43; Psalm 118; I Corinthians 5:6b-8; John 20:1-9]

Someone sent me an e-mail joke about dogs being "man's best friend." It goes like this: Here is a sure-fire way to prove that a dog is a human being's best friend. Put your dog and your spouse in the trunk of the car for one hour. Then come back and see which one is happier to see you!" Do not try this at home!

The punchline is that a dog is a human being's best friend. But I would contend this morning that Jesus Christ is "our best friend," in fact, the best friend of the whole human race! He does not emerge from the trunk of a car after one hour. After three days, He emerges from a burial tomb in glory, victorious over sin and death! ALLELUIA! I'll bet that the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is so packed with meaning, that for most of us, it escapes us.

First of all, why didn't His wounds heal at the moment of Resurrection? Was the power of the Father somehow imperfect, insufficient? Two reasons. To remind us that "by His wounds, we were healed," and to remind us that His wounds still exist in our world. In our country. In our own personal lives. As long as members of the human family still suffer, the wounds of Jesus are still there.

You and I still carry the marks of the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because you and I are still living and breathing and walking our own Way of the Cross. Those wounds may be visible. They may be emotional. They may be spiritual. But today's Feast of the Resurrection reminds us that they are not permanent. How? Because of another detail in the tomb of the Resurrection.

Why is the cloth that covered the head of Jesus in the tomb separate from the rest of the bodily linens and wrappings? One theory suggests this. It's all about a napkin. The Jewish tradition of using a napkin at the dinner table let the slave or servant know whether or not the master was done with his meal.

If he wiped his mouth and then threw the napkin in a bunch on the table, he was through. If he folded it neatly before leaving the table, he was coming back. Wouldn't that be something, if the head napkin in the tomb of the Resurrection was folded neatly, as if Jesus Christ, the Risen Lord, were to say, "Don't take anything away! I'll be back!"

Of course, many believe, myself included, that the Holy Shroud of Turin, Italy bears the full body image -- including the head -- of what was allegedly the dead body of Jesus Christ as he lay in the tomb for three days.

Another image John uses is darkness. "While it was still dark." Mary Magdalene was "in the dark" because she thought the body of Jesus had been stolen from the tomb. She had not yet come to the insight of the Resurrection.

How many of us here this morning are still "in the dark?" Still wondering WHERE or even IF God is anywhere in our lives. We return to the empty tomb, like Mary Magdalene, asking ourselves if this is really true. And, if it is, what difference does this Resurrection make in our lives? What brings you here?

Is there someone we have not yet forgiven? Have we hesitated to get involved in serving others? Do we take our Sunday Mass obligation for granted? What signs of death do we see that we must either confront or walk away from? Are you suffering the lingering consequences of past bad decisions? Setbacks over career aspirations? A general feeling of going nowhere? The feeling that religion works for other people but not for you? That God is somehow absent in your life or at least silent, and that you have been a disappointment to God?

Easter morning begins in the dark for Mary Magdalene, both literally and figuratively. So it is with us. I would guess that most of us are still "in the dark" when it comes to truly believing that Jesus would want us in a personal relationship with Him. That Jesus, the Word of God, came down to earth and humiliated Himself to be born in a human way with a human nature. That Jesus Christ would love you and me enough to die for our sins. That Jesus Christ would rise from the dead and give you and me the same hope of Resurrection through Baptism. He would do all this for YOU and ME? YES!

Mary Magdalene wept. You and I weep. For our sins, our weakness, our shortcomings. But today is not a day for weeping and guilt. Today is a day for rejoicing with the Risen Christ! With all our wounds and brokenness!

Easter was not born in the sunlight; it was born in the dark. And it still comes to us in the dark. Whatever that dark place may be in your life -- however

fearfully dark that place may be -- Easter comes there, in the person of the living Lord. Because the power of death was broken by the Resurrection of the Lord, all the power of darkness was broken, in all the other dark places of life.

Once Mary "sees the light," she becomes what Pope Saint John Paul II called "The Apostle to the Apostles." She is the first to run to the upper room and call the others to the tomb. She becomes the First Apostle to the Resurrection. Who needs us to bring the joy of the Easter message to them? Who do you know has carried that Easter message to you faithfully and lovingly? How can we imitate their example and inspiration? And, on the flip side...

What "old yeast" -- those sinful, selfish, hurtful tendencies in our lives -- have been growing in contradiction to the teachings of Christ and His Church? What does St. Paul advise you, in particular, to do in this passage?

Please enjoy the book we give you as an Easter present, Matthew Kelly's *Resisting Happiness*. Matthew Kelly once more opens our minds and our hearts and causes readers to reassess where they are at in their faith journey. In the first chapter he says: "The hardest war to win is one you don't even realize you are fighting. And the hardest enemy to defeat is the one you don't even know exists. Every day you are at war with resistance." What builds from that statement is a deep dive look at our relationship with God. Are you happy and joy-filled? What makes you happy and joy-filled? Important questions but with a definite answer that takes one out of their comfort zone.

Come this Easter morning to Jesus Christ, "our best friend." May the love our Lord showed for the world at that first Easter bring His joy to your heart, His peace to your spirit, and His holy light to your life. ALLELUIA! AMEN!

[Readings: Acts 5:12-16; Ps. 118; Revelation 1:9-11a, 12-13, 17-19; John 20:19-31]

Every year, on the first Sunday after Easter, we celebrate God's mercy, which is greater than any sin we may ever commit. This feast day, known as Divine Mercy Sunday, was established 17 years ago by Pope St. John Paul II and is observed by Catholics all over the world. The inspiration for Divine Mercy Sunday can be found in the diaries of St. Faustina Kowalska, a Polish nun who experienced apparitions of Jesus and recorded his messages. "My daughter," Jesus told her, "say that I am love and mercy personified."

During the canonization of St. Faustina on April 30, 2000, Pope John Paul II proclaimed that the first Sunday after Easter "will be called 'Divine Mercy Sunday.'" He also named St. Faustina the "apostle of Divine Mercy" and urged everyone to make her "beautiful exclamation your own, 'Jesus, I trust in you!'" Five years later, on the vigil of Divine Mercy Sunday in 2005, Pope John Paul II died. He was beatified on Divine Mercy Sunday in 2011 by Pope Benedict XVI. On Divine Mercy Sunday in 2014, Pope Francis canonized Pope John Paul II, along with Pope John XXIII.

On this Divine Mercy Sunday, I share two stories of how people have experienced Divine Mercy. They come from Lorene Hanley Duquin's book *"God Listens: Stories of Answered Prayer"* (OSV, \$12.95). I hope that you will recognize in these stories your own call to trust Jesus, to accept his mercy, and to become an instrument of his mercy by extending love and forgiveness to others.

Father Donald Calloway, MIC, was a seminarian at home on vacation when he was called to the bedside of a neighbor who was dying. "The woman was in agony," he said. "I remembered Jesus saying in the diary of St. Faustina that if you pray the Chaplet of Divine Mercy at the bedside of someone who is dying, that person will be given the grace of final perseverance."

The family members were not familiar with the chaplet, so Father Calloway, of Steubenville, Ohio, pulled a rosary out of his pocket and began to pray. "During that prayer we all saw the countenance of this woman change, from being in tortured agony to what looked like she was seeing something beautiful.

Then right there in front of us, when chaplet was done, she took her last breath. Her face was at peace. Everyone in that room knew that something deep and supernatural had happened.

The same thing happened when I was in the last parish, and our permanent deacon, Deacon Richard Damaske, a classmate of Deacon Marion Jurewicz, was dying at the Martha T. Berry Convalescent Home. Three women from the parish prayed the Divine Mercy Novena over him, and he received that same peace.

At age 15, Maureen Digan was diagnosed with lymphedema, an incurable disease that caused painful swelling in her legs. Over the next 10 years, she endured more than 50 operations, including the amputation of one of her legs.

“My already weak faith became even weaker,” she said. “I thought I was being punished for something I had done or something I would later do in life. People told me to pray and to trust God. How could I pray and trust when God kept knocking me down? I built a wall around myself.”

Her boyfriend, Bob, broke through the wall when he asked her to marry him. But Maureen’s first pregnancy ended in a miscarriage. Two years later, she gave birth to Bobby, who had a progressive neuromuscular disease. Then the lymphedema worsened, and the doctors feared that Maureen would need a second amputation. During this time, Bob saw a movie about Sister Faustina and Divine Mercy. “He tried to share it with me, but I wouldn’t listen,” Maureen said. “Bob felt as if God was calling him to take our family to Poland. I tried to resist, but it was no use.”

On March 23, 1981, Bob, Maureen and their son, Bobby, arrived in Poland. Five days later they prayed the Chaplet of Divine Mercy at the tomb of Sister Faustina. “I sensed Sister Faustina say to me in my heart, ‘Ask for my help and I will help you,’” Maureen recalled. “I said, ‘OK, Faustina, I came this far from home, now do something!’” Suddenly, the pain and swelling in Maureen’s leg disappeared. By the following day, it was clear that she had been healed. “When I returned home, I was examined by five independent doctors who had no medical explanation for the sudden healing of this incurable disease.”

The evidence of Maureen’s miracle cure was examined by the

Congregation for the Causes of Saints at the Vatican. “Having passed this test, my case was examined by a board of medical doctors and then of theologians.

Finally, my case was presented to a team of cardinals and bishops headed by then-Cardinal Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI). My cure was accepted by all as a miracle through Sister Faustina’s intercession.”

The first gift of Easter is peace. It’s a startling turn of events, given the action that preceded this hour in the Upper Room. There’s been betrayal of trust and a vigilant e mob, the cold rejection of religion and condemnation by the state.

There’s been denial of deep friendship and desertion by the cowardly. There’s been confusion and despair, former disciples turning tail and heading homeward in hopeless defeat. And then, the facts get even darker and murkier. Reports of a vandalized tomb spread. Those who loved Jesus are afraid to go outside, afraid that the violence of these past days will engulf them.

And when it seems the darkness can’t get deeper and the violence is all too close, Jesus stands in their midst once more, gentle as the dawn. And he speaks of peace. He brings peace in his extended, wounded, glorious hands. He offers peace to those he called his friends. It doesn’t matter they’ve shown themselves to be fair-weather friends, unfaithful disciples, doubters, and deserters. To a brutal world that condemned him to a violent death, Jesus comes to speak of peace.

His second offering is just as incredible. After a completely undeserved peace, Jesus extends the equally unmerited forgiveness of sin. Into a history as marred by selfishness as ours, Jesus brings healing and the hope that we are forgiven *for all of it*. Would you do that? Would I? We don’t have to ask. We already know the answer. What do we offer people who offend us, harm us, cause us untold grief and pain? How do we respond to a world of disappointments and fears and threats to our security? Do we walk through this generation of a thousand profound troubles as people dedicated to peace and forgiveness? When life hurts, when we’ve been hurt, are the first words that spring to our lips: “Peace be with you”? “I forgive you”?

The mystery of Divine Mercy Sunday is that Jesus is that kind of Lord. Jesus moves through the greatest violence history can muster and comes out the

other side as dedicated to peace and forgiveness as before. Lord of wrath and judgment. No excuses, no reprisal. Peace and forgiveness.

We hear no excuses about how he's been crippled by his past experiences and become an understandably seething God's answer to the world's hostility is in gently extended wounded and glorified hands.

The prophet says, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" How beautiful are feet that walk back toward those who sought to destroy them. How lovely the hands outstretched to those who denied and disappointed. How beautiful the heart that knows cruelty, returns full of mercy. Jezu, Ufam Tobie! AMEN!

(This homily was given also at the closing of the Divine Mercy Devotion at St. Faustina Parish, Warren.)

[Readings: Acts 2:14, 22-33; Psalm 16; 1 Peter 1:17-21; Luke 24:13-35]

Back in March of 2008, almost ten years ago, I attended the first-ever reunion banquet of the Holy Name of Jesus Parish neighborhood, which was roughly the area bounded by Mt. Olivet Cemetery, Forest Lawn Cemetery, and Detroit City Airport. Our home was near McNichols and Van Dyke, on Mt. Olivet Street. I asked my dad when we moved there in 1959 if there was any significance that our neighborhood was bordered by two cemeteries, or that we lived on one of two streets named after a cemetery. He said, "It must be that there are a lot of deadbeats in the neighborhood!"

The gathering of Holy Name alumni was surreal, because many of the people I "re-united" with I had not seen since they or I were ten to fourteen years old. Now they were in the fifties with grandchildren. Those who were young parents in the 1960's were now retirees in their seventies and eighties.

The young priest, who gave me my First Holy Communion during his first assignment after ordination, is now 83. Parishioners here have told me that when THEY go to reunions, they can't get over how much older their classmates look than they do. Of course, you and I don't age, just them, right?

Our three readings today speak of mystical, surreal, almost dream-like experiences. Look at our First Reading. Is this the same Peter the Apostle, speaking boldly now in front of God and everybody? Isn't this the guy who denied Jesus three times, and hid like a sniveling coward with the other apostles in the Upper Room on that "first night of the week?" Listen to him speaking with conviction, with strength, with bravery. What happened to him? Pentecost! The Holy Spirit happened to him!

His words in today's Second Reading are more subdued, but equally authoritative and courageous. He – or his companions -- must be coming to the end of their earthly life, and the end of their earthly ministry. He sounds almost wistful as he tells us how to live our lives during this time of "sojourn."

"Sojourn" is an interesting word. And I'll bet St. Peter chose it deliberately. It means that we're not going to be here forever. It means that there is another destination ahead of us. It means that we are just guests here while we live and breathe on this good earth. It means that our stay here is temporary.

So, does that change our approach to life? It should! You and I are like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. They were engaged in a lively discussion about the past three days. THE Three Days: Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday over to Easter Sunday. The FIRST time around! In the course of their lively discussion, Jesus shows up and walks with them. At first, He is seen as a stranger.

What follows in the following chapters gives no doubt that Jesus not only "appeared to appear" but that He DID appear to them and He DOES to us!

Note that they were going AWAY from the danger of Jerusalem to the safety and security of their home. Note, too that Emmaus is described as being "seven miles away." The actual town of Emmaus is really eleven or twelve miles away from Jerusalem, but Luke uses the perfect Biblical number to make a point: Jesus meets us at the perfect time and at the perfect place, right where we are supposed to meet Him.

And if it seems that Jesus wants to keep going, we don't let Him. We invite Him in. We invite Him into our hearts. "The sun is going down, Lord, it is almost night. It's soon going to be that time when robbers and vandals and murderers claim the road. Be with us, stay with us, keep us safe with You to protect us." And Jesus agrees. He enters. Jesus does not push Himself onto us. Jesus always waits for our invitation.

The Easter faith of the two travelers to Emmaus doesn't result from examining an empty tomb. It comes from meeting Jesus Christ on the way, from hearing Him speak and interpret His Holy Word to them, and from His sharing a meal with them. Here we find the echoes of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' miraculous feedings of the multitudes and His giving of Himself to the Apostles at the Last Supper.

And when the two disciples have an "aha" moment, they recognize that Jesus HAS risen from the dead. The Jesus they knew before Sunday disappears. That is why He vanishes. His physical, earthly presence is no longer needed. The faith of the disciples is rekindled to the point of giving them spiritual heartburn! They forsake the danger of the night to run on the road and tell the other disciples in Jerusalem what they have witnessed. It cannot wait until morning. It must be proclaimed, it must be shouted in the dangerous darkness.

Here we see what Jesus does for us, here and now, in this Eucharistic celebration. As Jesus broke open the Word to His disciples, we have the Word of God

explained to us during this Liturgy of the Word. As Jesus takes bread, blesses it, breaks it and gives it to the disciples, so He does for us today and every time we gather in His name in this Most Holy Eucharist. This is how YOU and I come to Easter faith!

At that Holy Name reunion, we didn't have the convenience of "before" photos on our name tags, which kept falling off anyway. But I had a couple dozen of those "aha" moments, when I didn't recognize the person standing in front of me until I saw their name on their name tags. Then, hugs and handshakes all around!

So it must have been for Jesus after His Resurrection. I knew very few people would remember me or recognize me because I was not part of the popular crowd growing up in Holy Name Parish. The Roman collar turned a few heads, and then there was ultimately the recognition that I was not just "David's or Pat's or Kathy's brother" or "Ray and Rose Marie's Son." But I was "Nick."

For Jesus, it was not his re-appearance as the defeated prophet or the pretend Messiah. This is the Risen Lord, glorified and barely recognizable by those who knew Him best and who loved Him the most. How could His disciples have missed recognizing Him? More importantly, why do WE miss it?

The disciples make up for it. They head back to Jerusalem. They forsake the dangerous dark of night. They can't wait. They were slow to "get it" on the road to Emmaus. Now they are racing to tell the others what they saw, what they learned, and what they felt. We are the modern, joy-filled disciples, called to strive, to celebrate and to serve. Jesus once again explains the Scriptures to the disciples on the road to Emmaus. He breaks bread and reveals Himself to them. He loves them right until the very end of HIS sojourn. And He loves us to the end of ours. ALLELUIA! AMEN!