

Easter Sunday

Year A, 2014

What is a big event that you remember in your life? If we are talking about a memorable public event, and you are around my age, you would probably think of the assassination of President Kennedy. Most people of my generation remember where we were when that tragedy happened. For me and many people, it is our first memory.

For my parents' generation, many people remember Pearl Harbor. That was before my time, but like the Kennedy assassination, it was something that grabbed the public's attention as we listened to President Roosevelt describe the attack as "a day that will live in infamy." People remember it, too, because it led to the United States entering World War II.

Of course for Americans more recently, when we think of a big event, we think of 9/11. Again, we remember where we were when the planes flew into the World Trade Center. I was working for Delta Air Lines at the time, so the use of commercial aircraft as weapons against our own country was shocking and terrible. Few events can match 9/11 in our country's history.

Big events are not always public and definitely not always tragic. We remember things like our wedding and the births of our children. We remember graduations and proms and all sorts of things. Those memories that we used to find in our family scrapbooks and videos and now see ubiquitously on facebook are important. Big events help to shape our lives.

The thing is that even with big events, our memories of them start to fade. For example, Pearl Harbor was huge. It motivated our nation to join a war in which hundreds of thousands of people were killed. But if you asked a hundred people today about Pearl Harbor and its significance, I wonder if even half would remember it. I am sure no one would be motivated now to do anything because of it.

Even on the personal level, our big events rarely last beyond our lifetimes. Someone may look at a scrapbook and talk with a relative who knew Aunt Mary or Grandpa; but at best, we all become a distant memory that will gradually dim over time with the people who come after us.

That is what is so amazing about Jesus. If you look at his case objectively, it raises many questions that should trouble the non-believer. We can concede that his death was a "big event" in his day. We're told that he was a popular figure among the people, inspiring excitement as he entered Jerusalem. Then there was a near riot of a crowd in Jerusalem at Passover when he was arrested. Religious and political leaders were involved in his story, trying to get rid of someone they saw as a threat. I am sure Jesus' arrest and execution would have made the news back then.

But Jesus and his death were not that unusual. Rome sentenced and crucified rebels and people they saw as a threat to public order all the time. Other alleged "Messiahs" had been crucified. So if Jesus was simply another messiah of his day, he should have been forgotten when the public lost interest and

his family and friends died out. People might have said for some years afterward that he was a good man done wrong. But that would not have been enough for Jesus to be remembered for more than a few years.

But Jesus was remembered. He was a wonderful teacher and compassionate healer, but that alone was not enough. Something happened that changed his first followers and that continues to change people today. That something is what we celebrate today and what gives new life to us in a way that no other big event in history can come close to—the resurrection of Jesus from the dead!

The first accounts of the empty tomb and mysterious appearances of Jesus shook up his friends and followers almost as much as his enemies. Those followers had expectations that had not been met and fears that had grown beyond human tolerance when Jesus died. They were barely holding on and trying to deal with the new reality of life without him. Then one or two people at a time started showing up at their gatherings with stories that were unbelievable—they had seen Jesus!

The accounts of Jesus appearances would grow as they were reported in other passages of the New Testament. Jesus met with individuals and he met with groups numbering, one numbering as many as five hundred people! Something was going on that was more than mass delusions or wishful thinking or remembering Jesus because he was such a good man. Something had changed-- reality had been ripped in two.

We know that because we still remember Jesus today. It is not like taking a history exam we have to study for in order to remember Pearl Harbor. It is not dependent on being an eye witness or an immediate relative or close friend of this famous man. We remember today because of the new life that poured forth from him as he exited the tomb in an Easter miracle that we still do not fully comprehend.

We remember Jesus because his followers were changed by his resurrection. They received power and their words and actions changed others, too. Their legacy became the church that covers the globe today. And we do remember Jesus because of the life and ministry of the church, the descendants of those first witnesses of Jesus resurrection. But let's face it; the church alone would not be enough to keep the memory of Jesus alive today. Throughout history, the church has too often gotten in the way of Jesus' memory by living inconsistently with his message so that people did not see Jesus in us.

But the new life that broke out of the tomb on the first Easter morning continues to break free both through and in spite of the church today. Like Jesus broke free from the guarded tomb, God calls us out of our protected places to do the work of God's kingdom. God still forgives people like the risen Jesus did for his first disciples in that upper room. God still calls people to move outside of our church walls with the Good News that Jesus is risen; just like God called the disciples to leave their upper room.

That new life has broken free throughout history in well known and beloved saints like Francis of Assisi and Teresa of Calcutta. These saints did such remarkable things that made no sense unless the resurrection of Jesus occurred and transformed them to do what Jesus would do. Christ's presence and power changed them and they were able to change the world around them.

And there have been nameless saints who have done heroic things as well, works of mercy and grace that we will never know about, done because of and through their risen Lord. And just regular believers like you and me, day by day, have lived differently because Jesus was raised from the dead—two thousand years ago.

On this Easter Sunday, we rejoice in the unique big event of Jesus resurrection. And because of his resurrection, we live with anticipation of other big events in the future empowered by his resurrection. Jesus' death and resurrection is not the type of big event that we need to keep going by relying on our own strength and wits. Instead that same energy that raised Jesus from death in the beginning still breaks loose among people today. It cracks open lives like ours and pours in light and power so that we can be the next generation that bears witness to his resurrection.

I feel that energy in our common life and ministry right now. I feel it in our parish and our diocese and in reports from around the world. I am not sure what is coming next for all of us. But I believe it will be a big event in and through Christ Jesus our risen Lord. Amen.