

Easter Sunday
April 24, 2011
Fr. Tom Elliott

Living the Paschal Mystery

Acts 10:34a, 37-43

Psalm 118

Colossians 3:1-4

John 20:1-9

A couple of years ago, I visited a friend of mine who lives in another state. When I arrived, his town was celebrating their anniversary. There were all sorts of special events planned around the anniversary. Isn't that awesome?! No, it really wasn't. I don't live in their town and I don't know anything about it. So, while I'm sure it was awesome for some of them, their anniversary celebration was only moderately interesting to me.

Isn't that how it is with most celebrations? Unless we have a personal investment in them, they rarely rise above the level of moderately interesting. Things are different, though, when we have a personal investment in a particular celebration. Not only is this true for civic celebration and family celebrations, but it's true for religious celebrations, as well.

Today we celebrate the fullness of the Paschal Mystery—the passion, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. For some of us that is only moderately interesting. Maybe we weren't interested in coming to church today; maybe we were dragged here. Now that we're here, we might be slightly interested in some of the things that are going on, after all, the church is beautifully decorated and the music is wonderful. If that describes our disposition, then that's okay. It's where we're at right now in our lives and God will continue to work in our lives. It does not describe everyone, however.

There are some people here who are very explicitly and consciously on a spiritual journey. Maybe Lent has been a particularly special time of growing closer to God, and now, the celebration of Easter is WAY beyond “moderately interesting.” It's awesome, exceptional, meaningful, fulfilling, and moving! It is the celebration of *everything* that God has done, is doing, and will do!

We see this same movement in attitudes in the lives of the Apostles. By and large, when they first met Jesus they were moderately interested. They were interested in what He was saying and in what He was doing. Eventually, however, they became *personally invested* in Christ's life—to the point of living His Paschal Mystery in their own lives. They experienced in their own lives the suffering, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Saint Paul explained this to Timothy in his second letter, writing, “If we have died with [Christ] we shall also live with him; if we persevere we shall also reign with him” (2 Timothy 2:11-12a).

Like the Apostles, you and I are invited to be *personally invested* in the Paschal Mystery we celebrate today—to move beyond being “moderately interested” and begin to see in our own lives the suffering, death, and Resurrection of Christ. Let's look briefly at what it means to be personally involved in the Paschal Mystery.

Life is full of suffering; it is part of life and no human being can escape it. While I'm not interested in getting into the theological explanations of suffering, it's important for us to recognize that our view of suffering determines our investment in the Paschal Mystery. For example, if we understand suffering to be something that victimizes us, limits us, and demolishes our hopes, then we will probably find ourselves very sad and angry. However, if we accept the suffering of life as an opportunity to participate in the passion of Christ, it takes on a new spiritual significance that allows us to move through it in peace and even joy. It doesn't take away the suffering, but it gives it new meaning and gives us new courage and hope. This is the hope that enabled Peter to write, "Rejoice to the extent that you share in the sufferings of Christ, so that when his glory is revealed you may also rejoice exultantly" (1 Peter 4:13).

After I was ordained a priest, I asked an older priest in our Diocese if he would be my spiritual director and he graciously agreed. During one of our meetings, I noticed that he was moving pretty slow. I asked him if he was okay and he responded, "It's just my old buddy, Art." Apparently, he could tell by the look on my face that I had no idea what he was talking about so he explained, "My friend, arthritis, is visiting me today." As the months went by, I came to understand that the priest wasn't trying to be funny, but rather, he had truly accepted the suffering of arthritis as a friend who brought him closer to Christ. He wasn't angry about the pain and suffering, but often grateful. That priest lives the passion of the Paschal Mystery in his own life in a very concrete and specific way. We are frequently invited to do the same in the difficult circumstances of our lives.

In addition to sharing in Christ's passion and suffering, we are invited to share in His death. Our death in, with, and through Christ is symbolized and manifested in a special way through the Sacrament of Baptism. The waters of Baptism represent a tomb that we enter. And, as we have died with Christ, we have hope and faith that we will rise with Him to eternal glory. Saint Paul explained this reality in these words, "We who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death," (Romans 6:3) and "you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ your life appears, then you too will appear with him in glory. Put to death, then, the parts of you that are earthly..." (Colossians 3:3-5a).

To die with Christ begins in a very particular way through Baptism, but it doesn't end there; it continues every day as we put to death those parts of ourselves that are earthly, those parts that are not consistent with God's will for us. This is a life-long challenge and process that includes our letting go of our sins, brokenness, disordered desires, expectations, selfishness, ego, etc. These "small deaths" not only prepare us for our final death, but they also teach us how to truly live.

While these first two movements of the Paschal Mystery are difficult, the last part makes it all worth it! Passing through the suffering and death of Christ, we share in His Resurrection! Saint Paul explained it this way, "If we have grown into union with him through a death like his, we shall also be united with him in the resurrection" (Romans 6:5). This "new life" in Christ isn't about becoming sinless, but rather it often includes new experiences of freedom, joy, peace, acceptance, selflessness, forgiveness, and patience. It is not a one-time event, but rather, something that deepens throughout the length of our lives, if we let it. It's a movement toward being able to say as Saint Paul boldly said, "I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). Alleluia!