

Homily for the Easter Vigil, 2017

Throughout the world Christians will say tonight, “Christ is Risen!” And skeptics will reply, as they have from the very start, “Show us the risen body.” It’s a fair question – and answering it opens up the meaning of this night.

Where is the body of the Risen Jesus now? Our community of faith has always insisted that the answer is not single but threefold. The first part is that the Risen Jesus is with His Father, having ascended bodily as Saint Luke tells us. He was from the moment he took flesh the bridge between heaven and earth, between the realm of God the creator and God’s good-but-fallen world. In Jesus’ preaching and miracles He described Himself as closing the wound that sin had opened between God and humankind, healing the suffering that flowed from that wound. As He said to the questioning disciples of John the Baptizer, “Go tell John what you see and hear: The deaf hear, the blind regain their sight, the crippled walk, and the poor have the good news of a time of justice announced to them.” He knew and predicted to his disciples that, after his crucifixion, he would be raised on the third day and would go to Galilee ahead of them. Galilee, where in fact they met him on the seashore and shared a simple meal with him, and where, finally, “a cloud took him from their sight.”

But the Risen, embodied Jesus is not only in the company of His Father. He also told his disciples that He, in His body, would remain with them whenever they blessed the bread and cup in his memory: Take this, all of you, and eat it; take this, and drink of it. For this is my Body; this is my Blood. Christians throughout history have understood that the one thing they cannot afford to lose, no matter how desperate their situation, is the act of gathering in the Lord’s name to bless and share the bread and cup. It was to do this that our sisters and brothers in Egypt met last Sunday, at great risk to themselves and, for forty-four of them, at the cost of their lives. They knew that, without the Eucharist, they were without hope; with it, no matter how terrible their situation, they were guaranteed eventual triumph. Gathering for the Lord’s Supper was worth any risk, for in it they meet the Risen Christ, healer and savior even from final death, in His Body, the gathered Church.

This past Monday evening faithful Jews throughout the world sat down to the meal of the first night of Passover, and they told again the story of their liberation – the story of the Exodus that we too heard just a few moments ago. Jesus chose the Passover night to give his friends the gift of this meal because he wanted to show himself as the fulfillment of that Jewish story of liberation from everything that oppresses God’s good creation. In Jesus’ rising from the dead, God has won the victory! The tools of oppression, including physical death as having the final word on our loves and accomplishments, now because of Christ are cast away, their power ended even if, for a time, they persist. Jesus knew that his Passion was the new Exodus: out of slavery to sin and death and into the promised land of never-to-be broken friendship with God. Jesus would be, and now is, in His Risen Body the eternal point of access to the Father – here embodied in the Real Presence of the Eucharist.

And in His sacramental presence He asks us each time we gather, through the minister who serves us the bread and cup of our Holy Communion, about the third form of His presence.

The minister's challenge "The Body of Christ" asks not just about the first two aspects of His Risen Body: It does that and more. "The Body of Christ" certainly asks, "Do you believe that Jesus of Nazareth fulfilled the prophecies and was raised to sit at the right hand of the Father?" Our "Amen" is a "yes" to that. "The Body of Christ" also asks, "Do you believe that the Risen Christ is right here bodily present under the sacramental signs of bread and wine?" Our "Amen" is our "yes" to that as well. But the third aspect of the challenge is different: It asks, simply, "Do you know who you are?" Our "amen" comes from Saint Paul, who tells us directly: "You are the Body of Christ: each of you is a member of it." The answer to the skeptics' question, Where is the body of the Risen Christ now? is also this: He is standing in my shoes. I was made a member of His Body in Holy Baptism, when the old self – my ego-centered life – died with Christ, and Christ was born in me as my new, true Self. To be a Christian is to be born-again as a member of the Risen Christ, a member of His Body, the Church.

Let me address a word here to those of you who are about to become members of the Body of the Risen Christ: The holy baptism and holy anointing you will receive in a few moments are a marker of your transformation by God's grace. You will become, to us and to every Christian, a sister or a brother with whom we share a unique connection. This is not like joining a society or a club. It is not the kinship of nationality, or ethnicity, or of blood. The Holy Communion of the Baptized, the sign of which is the meal you join tonight for the first time, is more intimate than any human bond. This bond, and only this bond, since it joins us into the Risen Christ and through this joins us to the Father, lasts not just for a lifetime but for eternity.

For you – and for all of us – that new life in Christ needs to be lived to be understood; you can hardly grasp it now, and we hardly better. But none of us will ever understand it unless we practice the way of Christ; we learn our confident trust in the Risen Christ through our choices and our actions, day by day and week by week. The Risen Christ does the work of His Father, bringing justice for the poor; so be an advocate for justice and a generous friend to the poor! That way you will learn the truth that the Risen Christ lives in you. The Risen Christ breaks down walls of suspicion; so be a friend to strangers, especially to immigrants and outcasts! The Risen Christ will come alive in you, and you will come to know the truth of his rising from the dead. The Risen Christ reconciles with enemies; so be eager to forgive! And through forgiveness you will come to know Him. The Risen Christ resists evil but nonviolently; so learn the ways of nonviolence in your actions and in your speech! As we do these things – befriend the poor and the outcast, reconcile and forgive, seek justice and learn to resist evil without becoming through violence what we hate – we discover that the Risen Christ is present in the world – we see Him act in us.

Selfishness, foolishness, greed, and sin have together done – and continue to do – terrible things to God's good creation. To embrace our Baptismal identity is to set our actions against the "horses and chariots" of destruction – beginning as we see these tendencies in ourselves. Tonight – our new Passover – announces that Christ lives, in His Church and in us as members of it. Christ is risen! God has won the victory! Horse and chariot are cast into the sea!