

EASTER SUNDAY

27th March 2016

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

– *St. John 12:24*



The Gospels have recorded for us eleven occasions when the Lord appeared to various people after his Resurrection: sometimes to a single person, like St. Peter or St. Mary Magdalene; sometimes to all his Apostles; once even to a group of 500 people. But we have not come to church today to hear a historical lesson or to think of Easter simply as a past event. In a very real sense, the mystery of Easter is something that continues forever. When Christ appeared to his Apostles a week after the Resurrection, we know that doubting Thomas would not believe it was the Christ unless he could first put his finger into the place where the nails had been. And that is a detail worth remembering: after the Resurrection Our Lord, although his glorified body could no longer suffer, still bore the marks he received during his Passion. Even now in heaven, the Lord in his glory still bears these eternal reminders of the price he paid for our redemption. These are the scars which the Old Testament foresaw when the prophet said, these are “the wounds I received in the house of my friends” (Zecharias 13:6).

But when I say that the grace of Easter is something that continues today, what does that really mean for us concretely? What if *we* could also meet the Risen Lord? It is true that we cannot place our hand into his side the way the Apostle did. St. Thomas Aquinas says in his beautiful hymn to the Blessed Sacrament, *Plagas sicut Thomas non intueor*, “I see not thy wounds as Thomas did, but I acknowledge Thee as my God nonetheless.” And here is the answer: today we meet the Risen Christ precisely in the sacraments.

We think of baptism as an Easter sacrament, of course, and this is quite right: the baptismal font was blessed last night at the Easter Vigil and around the world thousands of people were reborn as children of God when they received the life-giving water of baptism. The Blessed Eucharist is also obviously an Easter sacrament. I do not simply mean it is a sacrament we receive at Easter: although it is true that we have what is called the Easter duty: in order to be practicing Catholics we need to receive holy communion at least every year at Eastertime, in addition to attending Mass on the other Sundays of the year, even if we are not able to receive communion on those days. But I mean that the Eucharist is an Easter sacrament in a much deeper way. You know that in the holy Eucharist we have not merely a symbol of God’s love for us but Christ himself in person, with his true body and blood, simply under the outward appearance of bread. But in the Eucharist we have an eternal Easter, because in

the Blessed Sacrament we do not have the dead flesh of Christ but the living Christ. In the Eucharist, Christ comes to us as he really is right now: risen and glorified in heaven. So when we receive communion, we meet the risen Christ; it is as if a seed of heaven is deposited in the ground of our soul.

But aside from these two obvious Easter sacraments, there is another one – one so important that we literally cannot be saved without it – another sacrament which makes Easter present for us today and which allows us to meet the Risen Lord now, two thousand years after his Resurrection. I am talking about the beautiful sacrament of confession. If you read the Gospels closely, you will see that the very first business Our Lord performed after his Resurrection was precisely to give us the sacrament of confession. This is how St. John puts it: “he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven’” (20:20-23). And so we can see that confession is not just an optional extra in Christianity: as soon as the Lord rose from the dead, having paid the awful price of our sins, he gives to his Apostles the power to forgive sins in his name, a role that has been passed down through the centuries in the Church founded by the Lord.

If you think about it, the Easter story tells us exactly what happens when we go to confession. Although the world likes to convince us that our sins don’t matter, maybe even that they aren’t really sins after all, we know that we cannot believe such a lie when we look at a God who hangs on a cross to show us what we have done to him. Not Pilate, not the Jews, but *we* put him there. This is the only way to understand this shocking phrase of Scripture: “Him, who knew no sin, he hath made sin for us” (II Corinthians 5:21). But the cross of Christ is not the last word, nor is our sin. The third day, when the disciples peered into the empty tomb, only the funeral shrouds were there, neatly folded on the ledge. This is what happens when we go to confession: even though our soul has died and it is all tied up in a funeral shroud, stained and defiled, it is able to rise again and to leave that stained reminder of an old life behind. Being absolved in the confessional, we rise to new life and leave the tomb. This comparison obviously does not mean that Christ was a sinner – no, he freely took on himself the debt of our sins – but his Resurrection is for us a striking reminder of what he can do for us if only we would let him. Could you ever allow yourself to think that God does not care for you, when you remember that a God has died so that we might live again? But the choice is yours.

If you, dear friends, want to see the Risen Lord, then come meet him in his sacraments. “Therefore, if you be risen with Christ, seek the things that are above; where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God: Mind the things that are above, not the things that are upon the earth” (Colossians 3:1-2).