

Easter Sunday of the Resurrection of the Lord

When you're young, you don't think much about dying, but when you're old, you do. I still smile at this quip made by American author William Saroyan five days before his death: "Everybody has to die, but I have always believed an exception would be made in my case." A lot of us tell ourselves the same thing.

The fear of dying causes people to make the most of the days they have. For some, that means spending time with family. For others, it means devotion to their expertise. Some people commit crimes that they think will bring happiness. Life is short, even if you live to be 100. People make good or bad choices when attempting to make the most of their days.

The resurrection of Jesus forever changed our perception about death. He showed that death is not the end; that God, who had power to create everything out of nothing, also has power to recreate us after we die. Once people believe this, the goal of life changes. It isn't a matter of obtaining more things than anyone else, but helping all of humanity. We do that whenever we love our neighbors both near and far—and when we praise God at church.

Every year at Mass on Easter Day, following the first reading, we sing verses from Psalm 118 because of its many prophecies concerning the resurrection. It is so full of these that we sing verses from it several times over the next fifty days. Psalm 118 occupies a pivotal place, sandwiched between the shortest psalm and the longest psalm in the bible. It relates how God helped the people of Israel in their time of distress. The person who composed it may have had their own distress, circumstances any of us may face: illness, poverty, the departure of a loved one, the loss of a job, the pursuit of enemies. Whatever it was, the person asked God for deliverance, and God answered their prayer—much as Jesus on the cross prayed, and the Father delivered him.

As far as Easter is concerned, here are some of the key prophetic verses from Psalm 118: "The right hand of the Lord has struck with power; the right hand of the Lord is exalted. I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord." Even though this psalm was written hundreds of years before the birth of Christ, it's easy to imagine Jesus singing it on the morning of his resurrection. The right hand of the Father has struck death down. Jesus himself could sing, "I shall not die but live." He died but did not remain in the tomb. The Father raised him to new life.

Death leads to life, just as winter leads to spring. You may come to church this Easter with some kind of distress in your life, like the people who first sang this psalm. Maybe you've gotten some news you didn't want to hear. Maybe someone said something you wish you hadn't heard. Maybe you've said something you regret. Whatever distress you bring, Easter can change your perspective forever. Spring will conquer winter. Life will conquer death.

For Christians pondering mortality, an exception will not be made in our case. But Christ is already at work in us. The right hand of the Lord has struck with power. We have to die, but we shall live.

[cf Easter 2013]