

EASTER SUNDAY

April 4, 2010

I want to express my appreciation to Timothy Fallon for his leadership and insightful poetic reflection, "Be Reborn," I received while on a workshop I participated in at the Graymoor Christian Unity Center in Garrison, NY, October 26 - 28, 1982. I also want to express my gratitude to God for Margie and Dave Byers, the parents of Caitlin and especially for my wife, Louise, and for our sons Jeff and Alex, in this season of rebirth and new beginnings for us as a family.

Isaiah 65:17-25 + Acts 10:34-43 + Luke 24:1-12

Homily

It was an early spring evening, a few weeks after Easter. I was getting some food together for a quick supper following a Wednesday night service when three-year old Alex came walking out of his bedroom. He couldn't sleep and wanted to join me at the kitchen table. I've told this story many times since 1999, but on this Easter Sunday, it's a prelude to my 'witnessing to' rather than 'preaching about' the mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ.

As I started to eat, Alex grabbed my hand – and while looking at a big ole blister smack in the middle of my right palm, (a blister I got while gardening), he asked, "Dad, are you Jesus?"

"No, Alex, I'm not Jesus," I said.

"Did you have a nail in your hand like Jesus did," he asked.

No, Alex, I didn't. It's a blister I got from working in the garden," I told him.

"And then he said, with the imagination of a three year old, "I'd like to see you nailed to a cross, dad, like Jesus."

"Alex," I exclaimed, "would you like to see me die on a cross like Jesus did?"

"Jesus didn't die on a cross," Alex said.

"O yes he did," I answered, "but he came back to life again."

Without missing a beat, Alex said, "Dad, did you ever do that?"

"Do what?" I said, knowing darn well what Alex had asked.

He said, "Did you ever die and come back to life again?"

There was a pause. I thought long and hard and said, “Yes, Alex, I did. I’ve died many times. And each time I’ve died, I’ve come back to life again.”

His response was, “I’ve never seen you do it, dad. Can you do it again?” What I wasn’t able to tell him at three, we were able to talk about when he got much older, and it was that I saw him die to the life he knew in Louise’s womb as I witnessed the miracle of his birth. We’ve since talked many times about how life is a journey in which we die and come back to life again in ways we often can’t predict or plan – and certainly can’t control, try as we might. Sometimes it happens through decisions and choices we make in our relationship to self. Sometimes it happens through decisions and choices we make in our relationships with others. Sometimes it just happens, without rhyme or reason.

Twenty seven years ago I did the most difficult thing I ever did in my life. As a young Franciscan Roman Catholic priest, I took a leave of absence after falling in love with a woman I painfully realized I couldn’t marry. We created new life, a beautiful baby daughter we gave as a gift to a young couple through an adoption agency in San Diego. Before, during, and following the birth of Caitlin, I wrote a very long letter to her which turned into a Journal, which I sent to her through the adoption agency in California. My hope was that in time she would get to know something about me as her birth father. It included the following quote from her adoptive parents, Margie and Dave, which they wrote to Caitlin’s birth mother and me, with hope and expectation of being able to adopt a child like her. Their thoughts expressed on the adoption application, which led to Caitlin becoming their daughter, has been a source of comfort and hope for me all these years. They wrote: “We are grateful to you for sharing this wonderful, priceless gift with us... You will be a part of our lives as we raise our child in a home filled with love and joy. We have placed ourselves and our children in God’s hands... We look forward to that time when both you and the child will be reunited and can share your differences, similarities, lives, interests, and mutual love and friendship.” Through the years I’ve always prayed for Caitlin and for Margie and Dave, who have been her real parents all these years. And I have often wondered whether or not Caitlin would ever find me.

On the morning of the day a cataclysmic earthquake rocked Haiti, I opened my computer to discover I had a message from someone named “Caitlin.” I knew immediately who it was that was writing to me, and I was overwhelmed with tears of joy. And, in the time since that moment, Louise and I, starting with Alex and Jeff, have begun sharing this story of death and resurrection with family and friends. The remark and question Alex posed at three, “I’ve never seen you do it, dad? Can you do it again? Can you die and come back to life again?” - has been happening before his very eyes this spring!

A little more than four weeks ago, with many butterflies in both of our stomachs, Caitlin and I met in the Atlanta airport – and as we drove through the night, we shared thoughts and feelings we’ve carried in our hearts for many years as we both acknowledged our dream that this time would some day come. As we moved east, the dawning light gave way to the rising sun in Greenville, where we were welcomed home by Louise, Jeff and Alex, anxious to meet Caitlin. These weeks have been for me an overwhelming experience of God’s love, awakening new life in places deep within me that have been dormant. The color and texture of our family life has been enriched in Caitlin’s time with us and there’s a deepening of my love for Louise and our

sons because of all that has happened in Caitlin's quest to find us. In the words from a prayer at the Easter Vigil early this morning which speaks of how God's providence works in mysterious ways, "let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new."

Just a few days before Caitlin's birth in 1982, I participated in a workshop entitled "Turning Pain and Frustration into Growth." It was about the dying and rising to life we all experience each in our own way. A part of my heart had been broken and the workshop was just the start of a long journey toward healing and hope. And in time, I discovered the truth of Ernest Hemmingway's words, where he says: "Life breaks us all – and some of us get stronger in the broken places." It's been for me a journey from the darkness of sin, failure and depression, into the light of God's redeeming grace, forgiveness, and healing through the transforming power of the Risen Lord's presence in my life.

The image of the stone at the entrance to the tomb of Jesus is a good one for us to think about this Easter Sunday. Luke tells us that the stone had already been moved from in front of the tomb. But in Mark's account, we hear the women, on the way to the tomb early in the morning asking one another, "Who will roll back the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" (Mark 16:3) Sometimes we need help in removing the boulders blocking the pathway to healing and new life – a therapist, a spiritual director, a loving and compassionate spouse, a close friend, occasionally a stranger who walks into our lives quite unexpectedly. Sometimes we don't know there are stones as big as boulders blocking our hearts from opening ourselves to the gift of God's love and forgiveness. Sometimes we aren't able to name our brokenness and/or our need for healing. We need others to help roll the stones away for us in order to experience new life and rebirth.

Timothy Fallon, the leader of that "Turning Pain and Frustration into Growth" experience, gave us a poem on that workshop in 1982 which has new meaning for me this Easter of 2010. It's entitled "Be Reborn." Though written so long ago, it's a fitting reflection for the feast of the Resurrection of our Lord. It speaks to how the mystery of Christ's death and rising to new life happens in *our* dying and in *our* rising, through the transforming power of God's grace.

Here are some excerpts....

*Today, each day, all days – be reborn...
Discover again the mystery of God
the unity of all that is.*

Live in the present...

*Yet, remember your history
not nostalgically, as though you could return to it or would like to
but gratefully...*

*Remember, too, the pains and hurting –
search them for redemption:*

*If you find the sorrow turned to joy
the despair changed to hope
and death transformed to life
then rejoice, and give God praise and thanks.
If not, continue waiting, and trust in God's power.*

*Embrace the future hopefully and move forward –
not lacking in direction
but willing to chart a new course
as you feel the Spirit's breath blowing gently through your soul.*

*Be open to change, surprise, and especially pain –
For your vulnerability must not pass, but deepen...*

*Be reborn, yet admire your being, and continue your becoming.
And as you walk, walk always in the presence of love....*

Amen.

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