

Fourth Sunday of Easter

April 30, 2023

If I asked you, “What is the foremost thing we celebrate during the Easter season?” I imagine that many of you would answer “Salvation” or something along those lines. Or maybe you would say, “Resurrection”, or “New life,” or maybe even “The Paschal Mystery” or something like that. And all of those would certainly be accurate descriptions.

And yet, underlying all of it is this profound belief that somehow we have been “saved” through the dying and rising of Jesus, that somehow we have been reconciled with our God, that somehow a spiritual chasm has been bridged, and now we have access to the divine life in ways we hadn’t had before.

Jesus’ love for us and his steadfast faithfulness to his Father was not simply a “sign” of salvation, but a “means” to it. And if that sounds puzzling or is hard to wrap your minds around, don’t worry. It’s a profound statement, a profound truth that believers have tried to unpack the meaning of it for two thousand years and over.

And that means that the Church’s understanding of salvation has developed over the centuries. It has grown, matured, deepened and expanded. And some things we once believed and were confident of, we no longer see in exactly the same way. Remember, we may be on individual spiritual journeys but the Church is on a journey too, toward a deeper holiness, a more faithful witness, a more perfect communion.

God is never done with revealing himself to us. The Divine Conversation continues and will continue ‘til the end of the world. And once the early Christians began seeing Jesus as “Savior”, they also began wondering what it meant for those who didn’t believe, for those who weren’t followers of Jesus. (There were even discussions about whether or not Gentiles had to adhere to Jewish customs before they could be Christians.) This was a new territory, and it’s safe to say that the early Church had to wrestle with questions they hadn’t considered before.

And for the most part the Church (early on and in the centuries to follow) took what we would today call a “narrow” stance. They took what they knew about Jesus and what others had heard him say and came to the conclusion that EXPLICIT belief in Jesus was the ONLY way one could share in eternal life, the only way one could be saved. People were either “in” or “out”. And so sharing the Good News with others wasn’t simply an attempt to share something “nice” or “helpful” with someone else. Rather, it was a matter of life and death, SPIRITUAL life and death. And so people of Christian faith would go to extraordinary lengths (some helpful, some

less so, and some harmful) to try to “save” every soul they could. And it remained that way for a long time.

I say all of that as a lead-in to today’s homily, on this Good Shepherd Sunday. Each year on this Sunday we read a passage from the tenth chapter of St. John’s Gospel. And in particular, today we hear the first ten verses of that chapter in which Jesus says,

“I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.”

Jesus as the “gate” is an interesting image. And it “works” as an image in two obvious ways. One, a gate provides security for those within the enclosure. It keeps them safe. It keeps them together. It keeps them sheltered and protected. And there are times when that is desperately needed (night for instance). And not just for animals, but for us too, the times when our God needs to be our refuge, our place in which to rest and feel secure. But not all the time. Not if there is something we need outside the fence. Not if there is something beautiful and meaningful and life-giving on the other side of the wall. In those cases we need a gate, an opening to green pastures, an opening to a life of true freedom, a life free from everything that holds us back from the incredible life God wants for each of us, the life won for us through the saving acts of Jesus.

If you have a fenced-in yard you know that going through the gate isn’t the ONLY way out of the yard. Over the fence, under the fence, up a tree, off the roof, there ARE other ways one might go from inside to outside, from confinement to freedom, from barren ground to green pastures. And the Church of today no longer speaks in strict or narrow terms about salvation. The Second Vatican Council addressed this situation head-on, articulating the Church’s belief that we can never put any limits on God’s mercy. And so, we would say that the salvation of the world absolutely comes through the saving acts of Jesus; our God who died for all and for all time, whether we are aware of it or not, whether we believe it or not. And believing in that deep truth is a complete game-changer, a life-changer, an indispensable source of joy and peace and meaning and life to the fullest. What a God we have! Yet, God saves who God saves. That’s entirely God’s call.

And so the gate is there not to LIMIT who comes and goes, but to provide the easiest access, the best path, to provide the best way for us to embrace the new life won for us by Jesus, to provide an avenue to life-giving green pastures which begin in this life and continue into eternity.

And so, if we see salvation in a very narrow sense, if we see following Jesus as something we “have” to do or are “obligated” to do (otherwise we are in serious trouble), we will really never be able to live our lives full of joy and meaning and goodness and beauty. Our faith will become

a chore, a burden, something we only do begrudgingly or out of misguided or exaggerated fear. But if we trust that God is not looking for ways to punish us or pounce on us, but rather simply wants to love us, save us, redeem us, and lead us to the greenest pastures imaginable, then listening to his voice and walking through the gate is all we will ever want to do.

A Short Story

Once a great actor gave a wonderful performance in a large theatre, at the close of which there were rounds of applause. He was called back again and they asked: "Would you do for us the Twenty-third Psalm?" He agreed. He recited it as an actor would, perfectly, with nothing left to be desired as far as a performance was concerned. When he was finished, again there was thunderous applause. Then the actor came to the front of the stage and said that the elderly pastor sitting on the front row would repeat the Twenty-third Psalm, the Lord is my Shepherd.

The elderly gentleman, of course, was frightened. Trembling, he came to the stage. Fearfully he looked out over the vast audience. Then, as though he were at home only with one, he closed his eyes against the audience, bowed his head, and talked to God, and said: "The Lord is my shepherd: I shall not want...." When the old man finished, there was no applause, but there was not a dry eye in that house. The actor came to the front of the stage. He, too, was wiping his eyes. And he said, "Ladies and gentlemen, it was beautiful. You see, I know the words of the Twenty-third Psalm, but this man knows the Shepherd."

Father Boat