

Homily for April 4, 2010 (Easter Sunday)
St. Paul on the Lake Parish, Grosse Pointe, Michigan
Acts 10:34a, 37-43; Psalm 118 (vv); 1 Corinthians 5:6b-8; Luke 24:1-12

A man was running late for a meeting. In his rush to get across the street he failed to look both ways, was hit by a truck and died.

His soul traveled up toward heaven and he was met by St. Peter at the pearly gates. “Welcome to heaven!” Peter said. He glanced down at his intake computer and a look of concern came over his face. “Hmmm,” he said.

“Is there a problem, St. Peter?” the man asked.

“Just a little one...I hope,” Peter answered. “What kind of work did you do?”

“I am...I *was* a United States Senator!” the man said with pride.

“Oh, no wonder,” Peter said. “We don’t get a lot of your kind here...at least on the direct flight. The ones who make it usually have a bit of a layover.”

“I always liked the direct flights anyway,” the senator replied. “Why not just let me in?”

“Sorry, sir,” Peter said firmly. “We have our orders from higher up. You’ll have to spend one day in hell and another in heaven and then make up your mind about where you’d like to spend eternity.”

“Really,” the man contested, “I’ve made up my mind. Heaven is just fine with me.”

“I’m very sorry, Senator,” Peter insisted, “but we have our rules.”

With that, St. Peter escorted the man to an elevator that went down, floor after floor, past the P (Purgatory) floor, to the ground floor, parking garage, basement, sub-basement, sub-sub-basement, and finally to Level H: hell.

The doors opened, and to his shock the man came upon a scene of laughter and luxury! He saw many people he recognized there. They greeted him, handed him a drink, and invited him for a round of golf, which was followed by a dinner featuring steak, lobster and gallons of champagne. A dance followed, during which he met a gorgeous woman. He thought he remembered her from the movies. His time in hell just seemed to fly.

St. Peter, however, soon reappeared in the scene. “Time’s up,” he said. “Now you have to spend a day in heaven.” With that, they got on the elevator and returned to paradise.

Heaven was nice, too—good food and a nice gym, plus a lot of praying, singing and uplifting conversation. But it was pretty quiet, perhaps even a little dull.

After a day, St. Peter returned and asked the man, “Well, Senator, you’ve had a taste of both heaven and hell. Which will it be? Where would you like to spend eternity?”

The Senator scratched his head. “Well,” he said, “I never thought I’d say it, but I really prefer hell.” St. Peter asked if he was sure, and the man insisted that he was.

So they got back in the elevator and down they went, floor after floor, until they again reached Level H. The doors opened, the man stepped out, and the doors closed behind him.

The Senator looked up and froze. He was on top of a landfill, with flames of methane gas shooting out from pipes. His friends were dressed in rags and picking up garbage as it fell from the sky. The devil approached. “Welcome to hell!” he laughed as he put an arm around the man.

“I don’t understand,” the Senator stammered, “I was here a day ago and people were laughing, playing golf and dancing, eating steak and lobster, and drinking champagne. Today it’s a garbage-filled wasteland and my friends look miserable. What happened?”

“Oh that,” the devil said as he chuckled, shook his head, and waved his hand dismissively. “Yesterday we were campaigning. Today was your election.”

Easter is, understandably, a day of great joy. After forty days of Lent and its penitential practices and after the solemnity of Good Friday and our remembrance of the great suffering that our Lord endured on the cross, we recall the great miracle of his resurrection from the dead and we welcome the gift of everlasting life that he won for us.

But our scripture readings also remind us that even Easter, like life itself, isn't just sweetness and light, nor is it a past event only. It's a hard lesson to absorb. After all, who of us wouldn't rather focus on bunnies, jelly beans, and chocolate cream-filled eggs? It's estimated that Americans this year will spend over \$13 billion to celebrate Easter—most of it on candy, food, and new clothes. We all like a good party.

Our gospel reading points out, however, that the women who came to the tomb on the first Easter weren't exactly in a partying mood. They had come with spices to anoint Jesus' body and complete the preparations for his burial. Instead they found the stone covering his tomb rolled away and were confronted by "two men in dazzling garments." Luke's gospel noted that they were terrified, bowing their faces to the ground.

After being reminded of Jesus' own testimony about his death and resurrection, these women became the first of his disciples to proclaim the good news that he was indeed alive again, just as he had promised. They ran from the tomb and told the apostles, whom our tradition teaches were the predecessors of our bishops and priests. Unfortunately, the two Mary's and their companions didn't get a very good reception: Luke notes that the apostles dismissed their story as "nonsense." The lone exception was Peter, who ran to the tomb and left the scene "amazed" at what he saw.

Fear, skepticism, and amazement seem like a long way from marshmallow Peeps and Easter vacations. But they remind us that the resurrection of Christ and the new life we have because of it have consequences, no less the cross. One of them is to live with courage and hope, even when it's difficult. With all the bad news about the Church that has lately been in the newspapers, TV, radio and the internet, we can sometimes feel like those women and the other disciples on that first Easter morning: fearful, confused, not especially confident of our leaders, and not entirely sure of what will happen next. But they worked through it; and two thousand years later so can we.

Another consequence of the resurrection is going beyond our comfort zones for the sake of the gospel, just as Peter did when he encountered the faith of Cornelius and his household—all gentiles. Take time this week and read all of Acts 10 and you will see that he had to work through the limitations of his own background and experiences to share the gospel and embrace those who were different than him as brothers and sisters in Christ. But he worked through it; and two thousand years later so can we.

In our second reading from 1 Corinthians 5, St. Paul urged the church in Corinth—a church struggling with many controversies and divisions—to be renewed, just like a fresh batch of dough at Passover. It was hard, but they worked through it...and two thousand years later so can we.

Two thousand years ago a group of trembling women stood before a tomb and were asked, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" Two thousand years later, we are asked the same question and face the same choice—the same election.

Happy Easter! +