Be Not Afraid!

Each year on Ash Wednesday, we gather to start Lent to remember the fact that for all of us, we one day will die. We return to dust. And with that, so much of what we put our energy into on this earth fades away too. Sports glory is forgotten. People move on in high school and college. Careers come and go. We move into one house and out of another. Someone comes along who can do something better than we can, or do it more efficiently.

But all of these facts do not stop us as humans from trying at times so hard to keep from trying to get more stuff, or to get ahead, or to seek a better life here on this earth. And, on the one hand, there's nothing wrong with that. Being active is great. So is getting into a good school and getting a good job. But where it can lead to a spiritual crisis is when we think that we have everything under control, on our own.

One of the things I've observed over the last year with the pandemic is how for some, what is a rational fear has become irrational. And I fear this will continue for some long after vaccines are being distributed.

Fear can be helpful; we should fear dangerous things. And with Covid, reasonable precautions make sense. But being inundated with non-stop Covid news perpetually, cycle after cycle, I fear has made some people so fearful of truly living. Some may be still worried about getting Covid, and of dying of it, even after the vaccination. Eventually, choices need to be made. Yes, Covid and other diseases are out there. But there is also a value in living; of seeing a person's face and having a conversation with them; of laughing and going to events. And we will reach a point where Covid is still "out there" but we will get back to the sporting events, the community events and the things that give life meaning. I hope and pray we see more of this as 2021 continues, but it will take work because I do also believe there is still a lot of fear in people.

This fear though extends to other things. We can fear people knowing what we battle in secret; so perhaps fear we have to control our addictions, our sins and struggles without asking for help or even admitting to ourselves or others they are there. For some, there's the fear of the hate of others; so we don't confront the cancel culture mob by proclaiming our faith, or fear confronting a friend or loved one about something they are doing that we know is causing them and people around them harm.

As we move into the Easter Season, we find the apostles fearful and locked in a room. And Jesus comes to them, even though the door is locked, and says to them "peace." He shows them his wounds; for the wounds of the past are there and must be acknowledged, but He gives them love and sends the Holy Spirit upon them so they can carry out their mission.

I'd invite you to sit with that one word, "peace." Because peace is something we all need, especially after all we have been through this past year. Make it a theme of your Easter Season.

Maybe you are still fearful of Covid or more sensitive to diseases, or afraid of dying. Again, there is reasonable precautions to try and stay healthy. Take care of yourself, but remember that while we as humans might think we can control Covid and diseases, while we can combat them to a point, inevitably we all die. We cannot control that, but we can control how we live. So be at peace with that, knowing that you will die, but as Jesus promises us, in John 14:1-3,

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. You have faith in God; have faith also in me. In my Father s house there are many dwelling places. If there were not, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be."

So make the choice to live life and enjoy it, finding meaning in the friendships, the relationships, and special moments that make life so meaningful. The apostles aren't to stay in the locked room. They are to go out into the world as we we too to evangelize.

Maybe you are fearful of your past, or what you battle in secret. In our epistle from the Easter Vigil, Saint Paul writes in Romans 6: 6: ***"We know that our old self was crucified with him, so that our sinful body might be done away with, that we might no longer be in slavery to sin."*** The Passion we heard last week reminded us of the darkness of sin. But Jesus confronts this, and wins. He knows what we battle. And while in the Garden, Adam and Eve run away from God when He comes, when Jesus goes into the locked room where the apostles are, He comes not to condemn or settle a score but to give that peace to His friends, because He died for them. You and I are Jesus' friends, and He died for us too. So make peace with your shadows. Acknowledge what you battle and continue to deal with it through prayer, through confession, through trying to become a better person as life goes on, knowing that Jesus is there to forgive and to help you each and every step of the way.

Maybe you are fearful of rejection. The world can be an ugly place at times. Again, the Passion reminds us of that. But Jesus entered the world not to condemn it, but to liberate it. Jesu was rejected, but raised, and His message changed the world. It's now up to you and me to be His voice, so do not be afraid to talk about the faith and what you believe. Remember your words and actions can do so much to change hearts.

Maybe you are afraid of the future for our world. Sometimes we worry about what happens to family who have fallen away from the Church; or we get nervous about the political situations in the world, or civil unrest. The answer is not to hide in your home and embrace Netflix and video games to forget. These things are fine to enjoy, but remember we need to be engaged in the world. So don't give up on it. Remember Jesus promises the apostles He will always be with them. Remember Jesus said the gates of Hell would never prevail against the Church He created. Remember Jesus is with you ever time you come to Communion and the Holy Spirit is there to strengthen you. So don't give up on the world and think there was some perfect era in the past, because Jesus wants us to look forward to the future.

In our second reading from Easter Sunday, Saint Paul says “seek what is above.” in Colossians 3:1. It’s good advice for us all, because it gets us thinking as a Christian living in the world, but knowing our time here is temporary. Life is a blessing, but it can be so hard. We suffer loss. We sin and others’ sins impact us. We see people become ill. We see people make bad choices. And the temptation can sometimes be to think it’s every man for himself; or that I need to get the most out of my time here because I don’t want to die and need to think of my career and my resources and living the “good life,” or to just forget and live for today. But as I mentioned once in a homily referring to the Lion King, Simba the young lion realized he couldn’t hide from his problems, he had to truly grow and become who he was meant to become. The same is true for you and me. So let God’s love take away your fear and anxiety and truly give you the peace you long for. Yes, we will die. But Jesus will welcome us home, for with Him, we too will rise, so let us not fear death, sin, and rejection - but meet them head on with the love of our Lord, which triumphs over all. Our Easter Sunday Gospel closes with the words ***“For they did not yet understand the Scripture that he had to rise from the dead”*** (John 20:9) and sometimes we as humans too have a hard time understanding the resurrection’s meaning. So let us not be afraid to let Jesus take control of our lives so we can truly learn how to love and live, and find the peace that the risen Christ offers to us by dispelling the darkness and the fear, knowing that He enters into all of our suffering and sin and pain, but also knowing He will lead us through the troubled waters into heaven.

Life is at times ugly, scary and overwhelming. You and me, we will suffer, we will sin, we will be hurt by others, we will die. There’s no getting around that. But there is an answer; the Cross, and the Empty Tomb. For we have a God who doesn’t just create and forget about us, but loves us more than we can ever imagine. Alleluia, He is risen. So let Him liberate you from fear, and know that He is with you every step of the way through life, to lead you through the valleys and past the grave one day into His loving arms, to what eye has not seen and ear has not heard.

God’s blessings to you and Happy Easter,

Fr. Paul