

041209 Easter Sunday

Dear parish family.... dear family and friends of locals... dear visitors... Happy and blessed Easter to you. I hope you can say, as I say that this was one of the best Lent's I've ever experienced – and I believe that bodes well for this Easter season.

I have a priest friend – someone I met on the internet -- he's from Onalaska, Wisconsin – his name is Fr. Pat Umberger – I've borrowed a few thoughts from him and blended them with some of my own...

What a glorious day today! A sanctuary that was bare days ago is filled with the fragrance and beauty of flowers. The Church smells clean and fresh. That church word that begins with an "A" is sung again. The year has once again come full circle. We celebrate the most important thing we believe as Christian people. Jesus has risen from the dead!

You know – the New Testament wasn't written for many, many years after the start of the Church... long after Christ's resurrection. It must have taken the people of Jesus' time quite a while to realize what "to rise from the dead" meant. We can only imagine their confusion when Jesus body was missing. They may have imagined that it had been stolen. That would have been even another insult and indignity. Just when their hearts had sunk to the lowest point, they were faced with another possibility. Could he possibly have risen? And in not too many months after Jesus' resurrection, he appeared to St. Paul. Paul who was absolutely set on fire after his conversion to our faith.

The joy of this Easter day is a sure sign that this is exactly what happened. The faith that was enkindled in the hearts of so many has survived, been passed on and has grown over nearly 2000 years. And this weekend thousands of people all over the world have been welcomed into full Communion with the Church, even here at our own parish. These thousands from this Easter in the worldwide Church... and in the tens of thousands from prior years – all these converts prove it is impossible to crush the message Jesus came to live and to give. It is impossible for sin and darkness to win out over goodness and light. It is impossible for death to conquer life. The message of Easter is a message of God's triumph over all these things. Christ is risen, Alleluia. Alleluia, He is truly risen.

So here and throughout Christendom, Easter Vigil fires were lit, water was blessed, and Christians new and old refresh baptismal promises. We welcome new members and many of us are strengthened by their fresh faith. It takes a lifetime for us to realize what happened that day 2,000 years ago. The resurrection of Jesus colors every facet of our lives. We need to live it. We don't want to put it under a bushel basket or let the world tell us to keep it quiet. We need to pass it on to more people every day of our lives.

Pass it on... yes – that's what I want to share as my main theme for today. And to do so, let me start with a story. When Jesus was quite young... perhaps not yet 8 or so – one evening he was sitting at a table that his father Joseph had made. Jesus had an idea that he mentioned to his mother Mary:

"You see Mom, what I want to do is to get about twelve followers... And I will do something really wonderful – something good for those twelve. Something they couldn't do. I will show them... give them something they couldn't do or get on their own. And then when they wonder how they can pay it back to me, I tell them – they don't have to pay it back -- they have to Pay It Forward. Mary, his mother looked up from her preparation of bread dough. "What do you mean – pay it forward?" And Jesus replied – those twelve people that I help – they will have to do something special. Each of them has to pass on something powerful... each one passes something wonderful on to twelve other people.

So then 144 people get helped by the first twelve. Then each of those 144 people does something to pass it on to another dozen. Jesus' fingers moved the beads of a counting tool that Joseph had made... "Mom, within a short time – it gets so big – as many as 248,832 people or more get a wonderful gift they couldn't pay back." And His Mother looked at him... "Well Jesus – you always have such very nice ideas – loving ideas. But don't get your hopes up too high, okay?" "Now say your prayers and that's all for tonight." And that's the end of the first story of Jesus at eight years of age.

Now here's the second thing to share with you.... A little over a week ago – Father gave me the assignment to preach at this Easter Mass... I prayed and gathered materials. I meditated about the folks who have joined the Church and who are hopefully excited about their new gift of faith.

Like you, it may be that they wonder what they can do. I also thought of the people who come to church for just one hour a week... or the people who come just once in awhile... I was meditating upon those people who don't use or pass on the gift of the faith that Jesus died and rose to give us

I was looking for guidance about what to say... I lifted my mind to the Lord... I saw him on the cross... and I said: "Jesus – what could I possibly say to these people? How can we ever do anything to thank you for the gift of the love you have shown us? How can we possibly pay you back for giving your life for us?"

Now you may scoff – but in my mind, I heard a voice became very clear ... I heard Jesus say: "You can tell them they don't have to pay me back... Just tell them that I ask them to please PAY IT FORWARD."

And now He's waiting for us to agree to take the message to the streets. He's waiting for us to live as people filled with hope... sharing that hope with those around us. He's waiting for us to join the battle against selfishness, evil, sin, darkness and death... knowing that the power of the resurrection is infinitely stronger. It's the same power of the resurrection that 'got to' his followers... the same power that grew so strong in St. Paul. Even against martyrdom and ridicule, it was impossible to extinguish the message. Jesus lives. Jesus lives in us. Christ is risen! ALLELUIA!" Now – Go... Pay It Forward.