

The Journey to Joy

- Fifth Sunday of Easter
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First of all I need to tell you that I wrote this homily on a beautiful, fresh, early morning just after sunrise at Sleeping Lady Mountain Resort last weekend. That may help to explain the upbeat, optimistic tone of my remarks. Think of this as a sunrise homily in our Easter springtime.

On Easter morning this year I attended Mass at Our Lady of the Angels Church in Port Angeles. One remark of the priest stood out for me and has remained with me ever since in this Easter season. He said, "We should remember that we are on a journey to joy." What that means to me is that we are not on a journey to decline, to illness, to diminishment, to death, but on a journey beyond these to joy. The destination of our life's journey is the joy of being in the Kingdom with Christ, with our fellow companions of the journey, in God, on this re-created earth in our recreated physical and spiritually transformed bodies. Our Christian faith does not go all the way if we live with the predominant attitude of moving toward diminishment and death, of living more with fear and dread than with hope and joy.

Our entire Christian revelation in scripture and in the teaching of our Church is that both Jesus and the Church are about promotion of and arriving at the Kingdom of God. One day we shall be like Jesus as he makes himself known in these Easter weeks in his appearances after his resurrection: fully himself, physical, transformed, spiritual, real, on this earth. What he is now is who and what we shall be. He is not only the way but the proof, the guarantee, of the end of our journey, where we are going. That's what he preached; that's what he shows us in his resurrection, the Kingdom of God.

The priest in Port Angeles said it most simply, "We are on a journey to joy." Our creed does not just say that we believe in the kingdom, rather it says, "I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come"... that's the kingdom. On our journey to joy we look beyond death, we "look forward" to life with God in the kingdom in the transformed reality that Jesus shows us in these Easter Sundays.

Our readings of this Sunday confirm this. The first reading says, "It is necessary for us to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of God." The second reading even more emphatically explains the end of our journey in that kingdom:

I, John, saw a new heaven and a new earth... I heard a voice from the throne saying: "Behold, God's dwelling is with the human race. He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will always be with them as their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, for the old order has passed away."

There's your real journey; the journey through and beyond pain, and death, and mourning, to joy with God.

In the gospel Jesus tells us what to do in the meantime along this journey to him:

My children I will only be with you a little while longer. I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

The goal of the journey is clear and the way there is also clear: a journey to joy by way of loving one another.

Does knowing where we are going make a difference in daily life? Yes it does. Christianity has been accused of being “an opiate of the people” in that its promise of eternal life beyond death has drugged people into acquiescing into their current condition of oppression and providing an excuse for not working to improve the conditions of human life in this world. It is exactly the opposite and history proves it. It is Christians living from their faith in the promise of God who have been free and fearless, knowing they have nothing to lose, in founding hospitals, providing homes for refugees and orphans, building schools, sheltering the homeless, standing up for the livelihood of the workers, working for racial justice and equal rights, transforming laws for the common good, even suffering martyrdom in order to stand with the oppressed. Their faith, their knowing they were on a journey to joy, was not an opiate, a drugging to keep from changing human conditions of living, but precisely the opposite, the stimulant, the inspiration, the reckless freedom, because the goal of the journey is assured, to live lives of love for one another. Lay your charge elsewhere! History proves that Christian faith is no drug, no escape, but the unrivalled best cause of commitment to human justice and mercy, because Christians do not fear death, knowing it is not their end. Their end is joy. Jesus proves it.

I told you at the start that I wrote this upbeat homily on a sunny morning in the mountains at a resort. I, of course, need to end it with a poem, a favorite poem by a little known poet Anne Porter. She says better than I what I have been trying to convey, by telling of an event and a dream in her life. The poem is called “A Night in Ireland”.

Our steamship docked at night
In Cobh, an Irish seaport
A small one in those days

Not an inn, not a tavern was open
And we had to wait till morning
For the train to Fermoy

But in the wooded hills
Up above the town
Nightingales were awake
All the dark thickets
Were rich with their songs

It was on that night
And in those woods
I dreamed that I found the door
Of all doors the most hidden
And most renowned

Overgrown with nettles
Rustic and low
Built as if for children
Or as a gate for sheep
In some back-country pasture

And through a chink in the door
I saw the marvelous light
That's purest of all lights
Neither sun nor moon
Nor any star I know of
Could give such light

And I saw the crowds of the blessed
From the greatest to the smallest
The smallest were running and laughing
And Christ the Lord was with them
And also Mary

But before I could knock at the door
Someone spoke to me
I think it was an angel

He said You've come too soon
Go back into the towns
Live there as love's apprentice
And God will give you his kingdom

I woke up just before sunrise
When the nightingales ended their songs
Dew gathered on the ferns
And the cool woods
Gave off a scent of earth
In the early morning

I was hungry and cold
And I started back to the town
At the first signs of day

Already a sunlit smoke

Was rising from the chimneys
And mist from the water

I heard a rooster crowing
And then I heard the whistle
Of the train to Fermoy.

In her dream she saw through the chink in the door the brilliant light of the end of our journey to joy. But she, like we, could not yet enter. She heard and we hear:

You've come too soon
Go back into the towns
Live there as love's apprentice
And God will give you his kingdom.

Let's be "love's apprentice", let's go back into the towns, apprenticing ourselves to loving one another as Jesus has loved us, as we make our way on our journey to joy, when "God will give (us) his kingdom".