

**Homily for Easter Morning Mass
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

In my column for the March 5th issue of *Catholic Times*, I wrote about the football player, Damar Hamlin, who suddenly collapsed at a Monday night football game on January 2nd and went into cardiac arrest after a seemingly routine tackle. As Hamlin lay motionless while receiving medical attention on the field, players and team staff knelt and bowed their heads in a spontaneous prayer led by the team's chaplain. I said that there is indeed power in prayer, as Damar Hamlin made a miraculous recovery, and I noted that he thanked God, friends, family, and medical professionals who "saved [his] life."

A few days after my column appeared I received a letter from a person who had recently lost a loved one who died from an unexpected illness. This person was angry with God, saying that God had not answered their family's prayers. This reaction is not uncommon.

Undoubtedly, they are not alone in feeling that God has seemingly turned His back on them and ignored their prayers. That is an understandable reaction when we fervently ask God for something, and then it does not happen.

Jesus himself experienced this sense of abandonment as He was dying on the cross and cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In fact, Jesus was proclaiming the opening lines of Psalm 22. What is noteworthy is that Psalm 22 does not end in despair, but in fact goes on to "offer praise in the great assembly" and proclaim that "those who seek the LORD will offer praise." Despite their misfortunes, the people continue to place their trust in God, who fulfills their hopes in the end.

While the death of those we love is always painful, we must remember that God loves us and longs for us to be with Him in the Kingdom of Heaven even more than we long for them to stay with us here in this world. When someone dies despite our prayers for their healing and recovery, that does not necessarily mean that God has not answered our prayers. As a loving Father, God always answers our prayers, but not always in the way we want. Every parent has experienced their children

saying they want something, but Mom and Dad know better what their children need and what is best for them. No one likes to be told “no” in answer to a request, but no is still an answer even if it is not the one we wanted to hear.

Saint John Chrysostom once said in a homily, “Let us not, therefore, mourn as a rule those who die, nor let us rejoice as a rule over those who live. What then? Let us mourn for sinners, not only when they die, but also while they live. Let us rejoice for the just, not only when they live, but also after they have died.”¹

Our greatest hope as Christians is to become saints, that is, to spend eternity with our loving God in Heaven. God decides when it is best for us to receive that reward. For many, it comes after a long life. For others, perhaps God in His love simply wants them to be with Him sooner. In the end, we know that our Lord’s trust in His Father, even as He suffered, was rewarded in His resurrection from the dead, which opened the way for us to share in that same hope for eternal life.

It is admittedly hard to imagine our loved ones living happily in heaven when we cannot see that. They have left our physical presence and are now beyond our sight, so we only have the eyes of faith.

But we should not underestimate the clarity of vision that comes with eyes of faith that can truly see spiritually beyond this world.

It is significant that nowhere in the Bible is there an eyewitness account of Our Lord's resurrection. Our belief that Jesus rose from the dead is the central tenet of our faith. Without the resurrection, there is no reason to call ourselves Christians. We do not have the recorded testimony of any of Christ's disciples, the guards at the tomb, or even an angel who said that they saw the Risen Lord emerge miraculously from the grave. What do have is the empty tomb and the testimony of the disciples to whom Jesus appeared after His resurrection.

The first Christians understood that perceiving the risen Christ required more than eyes and ears. The real basis of the Christian faith lies not just in the historical evidence, strong indeed though it is, that the tomb was empty and His body was not there. The real evidence of the resurrection should be sought in the fact that His disciples ate and drank with Him after He rose from the dead. The appearances were mysterious, and not for all to see, but only "certain witnesses God had chosen beforehand" who ate and drank with him after He rose from the dead. It needed a supernatural gift of faith, not eyes alone, to see the risen Lord.

Saint Thomas Aquinas wrote: "After the resurrection the apostles saw with the eyes of faith the living Christ, whose death they knew as an evident fact."

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: We have come to church on this Easter morning because we know with the certainty that only faith can give that the Lord Jesus Christ is not dead but alive! He is no ghostly apparition, but lives in His physical, glorified body. Moreover, to this same newness of life He calls every person who will believe in His resurrection. To those who place their faith in Him, He unites them with Himself in His Body, the Church; He gives to them a share in the very life of the Triune God; and He reserves for them a place in His kingdom of everlasting joy and peace for those who remain faithful to Him to the end.

If we truly believe that Christ is risen from the dead and that we have been given the hope of rising with Him to new life, our lives can never be the same as they were before we accepted this gift of faith. Like those first disciples whose lives were changed completely when they came to believe in the resurrection, Christ's message of salvation changes the hearts and lives of all those who believe, permeates everything we see, everything we think, everything we say, and we everything we do.

“Christ is risen!” These three simple words make all the difference in the world—for you, for me, and for the Church. If not for these three words, our faith would be foolishness, and our hope would be folly. Centuries of liturgy, art, philosophy, not to mention, the lives of the saints and the sacraments, would be utterly incomprehensible. Still we proclaim that Christ conquered death for all, and that crucifixion, suffering, sin, or death do not have the last word. We profess that in the resurrection of our Lord is both our path for eternal life and our paradigm of Christian living.

The Jewish holy day, the sabbath, is Saturday, the last day of the week. But because Jesus rose from the dead on the first day of the week, Sunday, that became our holy day; and every Sunday, ever since, His followers have joined together for what they first called the “breaking of bread” and what we call the Eucharist or Mass. Here we listen to His word, are taught His ways, and become one with Him; but more than that, in the words of Saint Thomas Aquinas, we can come to see him “with the eyes of faith” and to recognize Him in the breaking of bread. Here in the Eucharist, we worship and adore Christ’s presence, risen and in glory, which we perceive in faith.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Saint John Chrysostom, *Homily on the Epistle to the Philippians*, PG 62, 203.