

**Homily for Holy Saturday Mass of the Easter Vigil
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

March 30, 2024

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Reverend Fathers, Deacons, and Consecrated Religious; beloved Elect entering into the Paschal mystery through Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist; and my dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

The account of the empty tomb from Saint Mark's Gospel that we have just heard (Mark 16:1-7) tells us that, right after sunrise on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James, and Salome came to the tomb where Jesus had been buried. Arriving at the tomb and seeing that the stone had been rolled back, they entered the tomb and saw a young man there, clothed in a white robe. Saint Mark is the only evangelist that refers to this young man. Saint Matthew says that an angel rolled back the stone and spoke to the women who had come to the tomb (Matt. 28:1-10). Saint Luke refers to "two men in dazzling garments" who appeared to the women at the tomb (Luke 24:1-12). The Gospel according to Saint John also says that when Mary Magdalene looked into the tomb,

she “saw two angels in white sitting there, one at the head and one at the feet where the body of Jesus had been” (John 20:12).

These differences in details should not lead us to think that they are contradictory, but rather the result of the disciples who arrived at the tomb trying to understand something very unusual and beyond ordinary comprehension that had just happened.

So who is the young man clothed in a white robe that Saint Mark says was sitting in the empty tomb? Was he an angel? Or someone else?

In his commentary in *The Word on Fire Bible*, Bishop Robert Barron helps us to answer these questions by taking us back to the narrative of Our Lord’s Passion that we heard last week on Palm Sunday.

Bishop Barron explains this in his usual very articulate fashion, so I will quote him in his own words:

[A] peculiarity of Mark’s version of the Passion is the curious appearance of a naked man in the Garden of Gethsemane. In the confusion following the betrayal and arrest of Jesus, as the disciples flee their master, an unnamed youth finds himself in an awkward predicament. “A certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and ran off

naked.” Scholars suggest that, like a Renaissance painter who places contemporary figures anachronistically into a depiction of a biblical scene, Mark is symbolically situating all of us in the Garden of Gethsemane in the figure of this man running off into the night. The principal clue to his symbolic identity is in the simple description “follower of Jesus,” which makes him evocative of all disciples of the Lord from that day to the present. Another clue is his manner of dress. The Greek term here is *sindona*, which designates the kind of garment worn in the early Church by the newly baptized. The point is this: following Jesus, being a baptized member of his Church, is a dangerous business. Participating in Jesus’ kingdom puts you, necessarily, in harm’s way, for Jesus’ way of ordering things is massively opposed to the world’s way of doing so. The shame of this young man—running away from the Lord at the moment of crisis—is the shame of all of us fearful disciples of Jesus who, more often than not, leave behind, in the hands of our enemies, our baptismal identity. The naked young man, escaping into the night, therefore poses a question: What do we do at the moment of truth?

This mysterious figure makes a comeback before the Gospel of Mark closes, and in his return all of us sinners can find hope. On the morning of the Resurrection, the Marys come to the tomb, carrying their spices and fretting about the massive stone covering the mouth of the grave.

They find the stone rolled away and, upon entering the sepulcher, they see “a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side.” The words used for “young man” and “white robe” are the same that Mark used to describe the disciple in the Gethsemane scene. This confident figure announces the Resurrection to the startled women. “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here.”

Exegetes suggest that this angelic presence in the empty tomb of Jesus is evocative of all of us disciples of Jesus at our best. Wearing once more our white baptismal garments, which we had abandoned during times of persecution, we announce to the world the Good News that the crucified one is alive. Having recovered our courage, our voice, and our identity, we function as angels (the word *angelos* simply means “messenger”) of the Resurrection.¹

This is what we as Christians are called to do: to be angels or messengers of the Resurrection, proclaiming to the world by our words and actions that we believe Christ is alive, that He lives in us through the grace of the sacraments, especially the gift of the Most Holy Eucharist, and that we are called to live in Him with all the saints and angels for all eternity in the Kingdom of Heaven.

In a few minutes, we will witness the Baptism, Confirmation, and First Eucharist of Kirsten “Evie” Fountain and Darrell Hurst, who heard God’s call and enrolled in the RCIA—the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. They have been praying and discerning, and we have been praying with them and for them. The waters of baptism are a sign that they will have died to sin by the power of God’s grace as well as a sign that the Holy Spirit will come upon them and make them a son and daughter of God. Then they will be anointed with the sacred chrism, the holy oil that signifies the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and will receive their First Holy Communion to complete their initiation into the Church. This is a great blessing for Evie and Darrell, as well as for the whole Church!

Think for a moment about some of the greatest blessings that you have received in life. Although we may first think of God as giving us health, family, and prosperity, the greatest blessing is our spiritual adoption as sisters and brothers in Jesus Christ. The various Scripture passages we heard tonight remind us of a history in which God continually blesses us—and yet the newness of life that began with our Baptism is the best blessing of all!

Paul invites us to recall the most important moment in our lives, the day we were baptized: “Are you unaware that we who were baptized in Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried with him through Baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by glory of the Father, we, too, might live in newness of life” (Rom 6:3-4.)

On this holiest of nights, we gather with the entire Church, and pray for those who are about to be baptized throughout our diocese. We stand apart from the world and enter the quiet of Christ’s presence to reaffirm publicly our belief, our faith in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and the hope that this mystery brings of new life for ourselves and for the whole world!

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Bishop Robert Barron, *The Word on Fire Bible: The Gospels* (Park Ridge, Illinois: Word on Fire Catholic Ministries, 2020), pp. 266-267.