

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

**March 31, 2024**

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Reverend Fathers, Deacons, and Consecrated Religious; my dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

One week ago, on Palm Sunday, we heard Saint Mark's account of the Passion of Our Lord (Mk 14:1-15:47). In the scene right after Jesus was betrayed by Judas and arrested, we are told that "all left him and fled." Then Saint Mark adds this odd detail: "Now a young man followed him wearing nothing but a linen cloth about his body. They seized him, but he left the cloth behind and ran off naked." Just as quickly as this character is introduced, we move on the next scene where Jesus is being questioned by chief priests and the entire Sanhedrin, who "kept trying to obtain testimony against Jesus in order to put him to death, but they found none. Many gave false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree."

Because the reference to the young man who ran off naked is fleeting and puzzling, we may tend to dismiss it and move on to the more compelling events being described. But it is worth coming back to this detail and ask, who was that young man, and why did Saint Mark include him in his description of Our Lord's Passion and Death?

We get a hint of the answer to that question in the account of the empty tomb from Saint Mark's Gospel that we have just heard (Mark 16:1-7). We are told 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 and been revealed to them.

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.<sup>1</sup>

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.

Last night at the Easter Vigil Mass here in our Cathedral, we celebrated 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. Over 115 people received the Sacraments of Initiation last night in parishes across our diocese. These newly initiated Catholic Christians 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 has come upon them and made them sons and daughters of God. Then they were anointed with the sacred chrism, the holy oil that signifies the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and received their First Holy Communion to complete their initiation into the Church. This is a great blessing for the newly initiated, 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. God continually blesses us—and the newness of life that began with our Baptism is the best blessing of all!

In our reading from the *Acts of the Apostles* (10:34a, 37-43), Peter tells the disciples that they are “witnesses to all that Jesus did, and that He commissioned us to preach to the people and testify that He is the one appointed by God as judge of the living and the dead.” How do we do this? How do we give witness to our Risen Lord?

In his Rector’s column in these weekend’s Cathedral Weekly bulletin, Father Brian Alford, Rector of our Cathedral, tells us about the “Paschal Joy” of the Easter season. He writes, “Paschal joy comes from the glorious truth that Christ has risen from the dead! Life is victorious, sin has been defeated! On the day of our Baptism, we became partakers in this victory, and because of that, we have great hope that we will share in the Resurrection at the end of our earthly journey.”

As followers of Jesus, we stand apart from the world and share the Paschal joy that comes from 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.

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