

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

April 20, 2025

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

Before celebrating the Sacraments of Confirmation and First Holy Communion, I always meet with the candidates before Mass to explain the religious symbols we use and answer any question they might have. At one of these recent question and answer sessions, a third-grader asked me what my favorite feast day was. I said my favorite feast day is Easter. I explained that, while Christmas is a joyful time to celebrate God taking on our human nature in the flesh, the greatness of that mystery takes on even greater significance by virtue of Christ rising from the dead, which we celebrate on Easter Sunday and throughout the Easter season. It is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead that gives us the essence of our identity as Christians. Saint Paul wrote that “if Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain; you are still in your sins” (1 Corinthians 15:17).

In our Gospel reading that we just heard for Easter Sunday (John 20:1-9), Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb of Jesus and immediately discovers that the big stone covering the entrance to the tomb has been removed. She neither enters the tomb nor even looks inside. Instead, she immediately runs to Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple, telling them what she has concluded from her brief experience: She is convinced that someone has stolen the body of Jesus.

Both Peter and the Beloved Disciple run to the tomb, based on the information Mary Magdalene has given them. The Beloved Disciple arrives at the tomb first. The Beloved Disciple does not enter the tomb but instead waits for Peter to arrive. He enters the tomb and sees that indeed it is empty; the burial cloths are still there with the head covering in a separate place. There is no response at all from Peter.

After Peter has gone into the tomb and seen what was and was not there, the Beloved Disciple enters. He sees and believes. Obviously, this means that he saw exactly what Peter had seen. But whereas Peter offered no response at all, the Beloved Disciple responds with faith. He believes. The Beloved Disciple is a model in John's Gospel for what a faithful disciple should be. Although he does not replace the role of Peter among

the disciples, he believes before Peter does, just as he arrived at the empty tomb before Peter did.

We know, of course, that Peter eventually comes to believe that Our Lord has risen from the dead. In our first reading from the *Acts of the Apostles* (Acts 10:34a, 37–43), which tells of the events of the early Christian community, Peter has accepted an invitation from a Roman officer to preach to his household (Acts 10:9–23). Now he has entered that house and begins to proclaim the Gospel.

Peter first reviews significant moments in the Lord's earthly ministry. In Galilee, John the Baptist preached a baptism of repentance, challenging people to prepare for the coming of the Lord. At his baptism by John, Jesus of Nazareth was anointed with the Holy Spirit and power from heaven. Peter and the other apostles were privileged to witness all the good works and healings Jesus performed in the land of Judea and in Jerusalem. Jesus freed people from the influence of the prince of this world. Yet still there were people who refused to believe in Jesus as the Son of God. In the end, they had Jesus crucified. Other accounts of a person's life would have ended with this detail, but Peter has much more to say.

On the third day, Jesus rose from the dead. Along with other chosen disciples, Peter can testify beyond doubt that Jesus of Nazareth is the risen Lord. The risen Lord is judge of the living and the dead. But Peter's purpose is not to condemn anyone. Instead, he now offers forgiveness of sins to this audience in the home of Cornelius—and to all those who believe through the name of Jesus.

In the last line of the Nicene Creed we profess, "I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen." The phrase "resurrection of the dead" refers here not to Jesus, but to all of us. Jesus tells His disciples very clearly that "the hour is coming in which all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and will come out, those who have done good deeds to the resurrection of life, but those who have done wicked deeds to the resurrection of condemnation" (John 5:28-29).

Thus, there is a crucial connection between the resurrection of the dead and the exercise of our free will to choose between good and evil, love and hate. We must live doing good with the help of God's grace if we wish to be raised up to eternal life in God's Kingdom, while refraining from doing wicked deeds so as to avoid eternal damnation.

Those of us who go to Mass every Sunday are aware that there are many more people here today on Easter Sunday than we usually see on a weekly basis. We welcome you and invite you to join us every Sunday! Christians observe Sunday as the Lord's Day because Sunday is the day that Jesus rose from the dead. Since Sunday celebrates our Lord's resurrection, every Sunday in a sense is an Easter celebration. Christians who go to church on Easter Sunday because they want to celebrate our Lord's resurrection really should want to go to Mass every Sunday to celebrate our Lord's resurrection from the dead. In fact, many people who truly understand and appreciate the meaning of the Mass go to church daily to receive Our Lord in Holy Communion, not just on Sundays.

Saint Ambrose said, "If [Holy Communion] is 'daily bread,' why do you take it once a year? Take daily what is to profit you daily. Live in such a way that you may deserve to receive it daily. He who does not deserve to receive it daily, does not deserve to receive it once a year."

Pope Saint Leo the Great wrote, "Foreshadowings of the future resurrection should appear in the holy city, the Church of God: what is to happen to our bodies should now take place in our hearts. ... The body that lay lifeless in the tomb is ours. The body that rose again on the third day is

ours. The body that ascended above all the heights of heaven to the right hand of the Father's glory is ours. If then we walk in the way of His commandments, and are not ashamed to acknowledge the price He paid for our salvation in a lowly body, we too are to rise to share his glory. The promise he made will be fulfilled in the sight of all."

May God give us this grace. Amen.