

The Solemn Vigil of Easter
April 20, 2019
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
116 Theodore St.
Scranton, PA 18508
Luke 24:1-12

Our Lord's Passion and death, which we observed in our liturgies yesterday and the day before, remind us of how cruel the world can be. The innocent suffer unspeakable indignation and often the guilty suffer no temporal consequences for their wickedness. Many of the men who killed the Son of God, who spat in His face, crowned Him with thorns, and exposed Him naked upon a tree went about their business for the next forty years as if they had done nothing wrong. The injustices of the world, such as this supreme injustice, lead us to seek consolation, much as the women in tonight's Gospel sought consolation, sought comfort, in visiting our Lord's tomb on Easter Sunday morning. They thought that the opportunity to undertake Jewish funeral rites would bring them some comfort after the horrific desolation they had witnessed at the hands of the Romans.

When they went inside the tomb and found it empty, as Jesus promised it would be, the Angel of God confronted them and asked, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" This question was for them, but it is also directed at us, the followers of Jesus down through the ages, who seek consolation in that which will not give us life. We are disconsolate because of what we've endured, but we seek comfort in that which will not help and in fact will make our desolation worse.

Tomorrow is the twelfth anniversary of my ordination to the Holy Priesthood, and what I have learned from more than a decade of hearing confessions is that people too often seek life where there is only death. I am thinking here of St. Thomas Aquinas's assertion that no one ever does anything that, to him, is not good. That is, when people commit sins, they do so imagining that they will derive some good from their misdeeds. This is precisely what I encounter in the confessional time and time again, the embrace of what people momentarily imagine will be good for them, only to be confronted in the aftermath with guilt, shame, and the desolation we feel whenever we choose what we think is good, instead of what God told us is actually and objectively good.

It's easy to see how sin thus leads to desolation, but the ladies in tonight's Gospel aren't doing anything wrong. Yet their search for the living among the dead was sure to issue in their dissatisfaction. As much as caring for Jesus' body might have brought them a bit of comfort, their search for consolation among the dead would finally have given them no lasting relief. What we learn is that even if we aren't actually sinning, we can end up in desolation because the places we go and the things we pursue are not life-giving. It isn't wrong to eat, for example, but no matter how great the meal, even day after day, food will not give us the lasting satisfaction we desire. What makes us whole, and what gives us life, are those things that are eternal, the things that endure that we will retain even after we pass from this life.

What does seeking the living among the dead look like today? Even more than the acquisition of material things, even more than the pursuit of knowledge devoid of wisdom, modern American culture seeks consolation in entertainment. In and of itself, there is nothing wrong with entertainment, as recreational pursuits are of great help in building the culture and giving us rest from our labors. However, we tend to make entertainment an idol, going so far as to carry our entertainment device in our pockets

everywhere we go. This tendency is a long time coming. Stevie Wonder wrote a song when I was still in elementary school called “Pastime Paradise,” and I didn’t know what it meant until fairly recently. More than forty years ago, he saw that too many people live just to pass the time, and we fill the time being entertained. A little more than ten years later, Kurt Cobain made the same observation in the song, “Smells like Teen Spirit.” Three years later he killed himself. Even our entertainers know that our entertainments are empty. They can’t satisfy, and what consolations they offer are fleeting.

If we want to be comforted, if we want to be truly consoled, then we must seek life where it is to be found. To live our faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, we must go to where life is, which is to say, we must go to Him. In Jesus Christ, and the sure means of His grace that He has given in the Sacraments of the Church, we will find the consolation we need as we walk through this valley of tears. What His grace will communicate is the same thing the women learned on the first Easter Sunday, that our consolation will come in serving the Risen Lord, in doing what He says by loving those He loves.

The ladies were told to share the Good News of our Lord’s resurrection, and that’s our job, too. To go to Church and receive God’s grace in the Sacraments gives us the strength we need to indicate to others where to find life. When we set our entertainments aside, we will find that true life comes in packages like family, fellowship, charity, and prayer—all the things that give us a foretaste of heaven here and which we’ll still have before the Throne of Grace.