

Resurrection of the Lord
April 5, 2015
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
John 20:1-9

Zhang Tien Chen is a Chinese citizen who will be baptized and confirmed and receive his First Holy Communion later today, when we travel down to Bath to celebrate Mass with our Blessed John Henry Newman mission. Tien Chen who goes by Tim, is a senior in high school, who intends to matriculate at a Penn State University in the fall. Having gone to a Catholic school while here in America, where he aced his religion classes, Tim asked if I would receive him into the Church.

What has had more influence on Tim than his Catholic education is his host family, Keith and Lily Andreve. The Andreves had their marriage blessed in the Church last year, and Keith, who had been Anglican for a while, was reconciled to Holy Mother Church and confirmed. Tim came to Mass with Keith nearly every time I saw him in Bath. So it is this personal, family connection that has given our parish the gift and privilege of welcoming another soul into the family of God.

Tim's decision to be baptized and confess with us Jesus' resurrection from the dead and His triumph over sin and death is a courageous one. Many of those closest to this young man are atheists, and the government of his native land is overtly hostile to the Catholic Church, particularly that part of the Church that pledges its fealty to the Holy See, that part that seeks to submit itself to the authority of our Holy Father, Pope Francis.

When Tim goes home to China after his student visa has expired, he will have to seek out a local parish. There he will find Catholic communities associated with the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association, the only Catholic churches recognized by the communist government. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI criticized the Patriotic Association because of "...the significant part played by entities that have been imposed as the principal determinants in the life of the Catholic community," so that "...persons who are not ordained, and sometimes not even baptized, control and take decisions concerning important ecclesial questions, including the appointment of bishops, in the name of various State agencies." The consequence of such interference in the life of the Church, we can see, is the demeaning of the Pope's role as the successor of St. Peter and the actual head of the Catholic Church. The implication for Tim will be his obligation to avoid such false Catholics, lest he imperil his faith and even his soul.

A hostile environment poses certain challenges to maintaining one's faith. Notice in our Gospel this morning that Mary Magdalene immediately assumes that Jesus' body has been stolen from the tomb, that cruel enemies, unseen and unknown, have taken the body of Jesus and laid it somewhere else. This has the hallmarks of a culture of suspicion, where we first assume the worst, even when the worst is contrary to what we already know.

Remember that Jesus had told His disciples numerous times that he would be betrayed, handed over to the Gentiles and crucified, but on the third day be raised from the dead. Certainly Mary Magdalene knew this, even if she did not understand. Nevertheless, having just been a witness to Jesus' Passion, to the unimaginable cruelty of the Roman state, she attributed the empty tomb to body snatchers, to grave robbers who were adding insult to her already grievous injury.

The counterpart to Mary Magdalene's suspicion is St. John's faith. After Mary reported what she saw, Peter and John raced to the tomb. They were both aware of Mary's explanation for why Jesus was not in the tomb, so we might imagine they wanted simply to confirm Mary's account. Instead, the youthful John followed the prince of the apostles into the tomb, and the Gospel tells us, "...he saw and believed." Now he didn't believe Mary; he believed what the Lord had told him. His faith in the words of Jesus Christ was stronger than his suspicion of his fellow men. He had been more formed by the Word of the Lord than by his experience of the cruelty of his neighbors.

This is a perennial challenge for people of faith, the challenge to resist adopting the suspicions of the enemies of the Church. After all, this is the reason the Church is persecuted, because our adversaries are suspicious of her. If we become suspicious of all those around us, then we are adopting the posture, the very orientation of those who oppose Holy Mother Church. The Word of God must be more firmly planted in our hearts than our experience of the world's sinfulness.

Specifically the words of the Lord we must carry most closely are His admonition, "Do not be afraid." He has chosen us to be missionaries to proclaim His victory over sin and the grave; and if we are afraid, we will be paralyzed, unable to preach the Truth for fear of what our neighbors might do.

To love our neighbors and share with them the Good News of our salvation in the death and resurrection of Jesus, we will need to make ourselves vulnerable. That is, our love for those around us must be stronger than our fear of what they might do to us if their suspicions are stronger than their love. We know this was true of all the apostles, not least of all St. John, who was charged with taking care of Jesus' mother Mary and who lived with her first in Jerusalem and then in Ephesus until her Assumption into heaven. His commitment to love did not waver despite his torture, imprisonment and exile, despite watching his brother apostles one by one be cut down by the sword.

I have often said to you that it is very unlikely that any of us here in America would be called to martyrdom. I cannot say this about Tim, who upon his return home will be charged with maintaining and sharing his faith in an environment that is difficult at best and unspeakably brutal at its worst. The people who gave us the Cultural Revolution and Tiananmen Square are still in charge over there. But the Lord would not have brought Tim to us if he did not have a role to play in the conversion of his countrymen, for we that are baptized are all called to be missionaries. Our prayers are with our newest brother in Christ, that his love for his neighbors will always be stronger than his fear of what they might do to him.

Mary Magdalene, we know, recovered from her suspicions. One of the first witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus, she was called by St. Augustine the apostle to the apostles, since she told them of her encounter with the Lord at the tomb after Peter and John left. In her later life, she would suffer much for her faithfulness to Christ, and indeed she remained devoted. What sustained her was her encounter with the Risen Lord, her personal relationship with Him who called her by name even when she didn't recognize Him. That personal relationship would be sustained by her participation in the Eucharist. For years, until she died at the age of seventy-two, she was fed only with the Bread of Life the Cup of Salvation.

If our love is to remain stronger than our fears, if we are to reach out to our neighbors more readily than be suspicious of them, we too must have an experience of the Risen Lord that is nurtured by reception as often as possible of His Body and Blood in the Sacrament of the Altar. For us, finding a validly ordained priest celebrating a licit Eucharist is no trouble at all. Imagine when Tim returns home the sacrifices he will have to make just to do this. Then give thanks to God our ancestors had the courage to share their Easter joy with those who did not yet believe. And pray for the courage to keep doing so, lest our nation fall back into darkness.