

Holy Week Meditation

(First of two parts)

As Lent draws to a close and the days of Holy Week approach our thoughts should be turning to the powerful liturgies of Palm Sunday, Holy Thursday, Good Friday and the Easter Vigil commemorating the great Passover of the Lord Jesus Christ. We should be intensifying our prayers for the catechumens, our fasting, our almsgiving, and our expressions of sorrow for our sins. However, the celebration of Easter, like Christmas can be focused on anything but the mystery of the resurrection. Thoughts of a big family meal, colored Easter eggs, chocolate bunnies, little yellow marshmallow chicks, Easter baskets, a church full of Easter lilies, new spring outfits, and the melody of Irving Berlin's "Easter Parade" may be uppermost in our minds.

However we would do well to meditate on Jesus' death and the mystery of the Father raising His Anointed One to New Life. It is the light of our lives.

"Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has it entered the mind of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him" (1 Cor. 2:9). If these words of St. Paul are true of us whose love of God is imperfect, how much more true are they of Jesus who loved His father with a perfect love.

The near blind light of Easter Sunday is God's infinite love for all creation, for all humanity and for Jesus Christ. This is why what God had prepared for His Beloved Son, and suffering servant who was faithful even to death has not, and indeed cannot, even enter the minds of men and women of this or any other age. Though we cannot fully understand the meaning or the reality of Christ's resurrection in this life, we are certain that it centers us upon the great mystery truth that Jesus Christ, who was crucified, lives in glory and through His Holy Spirit He actively sustains the faith of the members of His body, the Church.

We human beings have a natural curiosity and a desire for details to the Easter mystery. In a technological age we have come to expect exactness and certitude. Our Christian faith makes us confident that death is not the end of the human pilgrimage. At the time of death the church prays that life is not ended but merely changed.

There is a great interest in the studies of

Dr. Elizabeth Kubler Ross (On Death and Dying) and Dr. Raymond Moody (Life After Death) and others who conduct scientific experiments concerning how people feel in the face of death and their grounds for believing in some form of human survival of death. People are naturally interested to learn about theories concerning the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the dead. They are sometimes surprised to learn that the two are not the same. Yet interesting as these studies are, and as valuable as some of their findings may prove to be, they will never prove, nor for that matter disprove the Christian faith. God has not promised an intellectually satisfying theory for those who love Him. He has promised life. "Behold I tell you a mystery. We shall all be changed." (St. Paul)

Because of our natural inquisitiveness we can come to Holy Week and the great Easter feast looking for everything but what is there: A radical and overwhelming revelation of God's love. From the point of view of our curiosity about details, the scriptures are rather disappointing. They tell us that Jesus died, and that he was buried. Several days later mourners come to anoint the body, they find only the empty tomb. A messenger from God proclaims to the followers of Jesus that they should not seek the living among the dead. The Scriptures inform us that the twelve and many of the disciples subsequently encounter the glorified Christ, and they have no doubt that Jesus lives among them.

This probably is not the way we would have arranged it. We might have stationed Theresa Schmidt of KPLC-TV at the tomb for a Sunday sunrise interview. We would have the cameras rolling and have close up shots of the resurrection in progress. We might like to see Larry King do an exclusive interview with Herod and Pontius Pilate. But the New Testament does not contain any of this. Human imagination has often been anxious to fill in while the Scriptures have been silent. Through the centuries artists have depicted the scene of Christ thundering forth from the tomb with a great banner of triumph in his hands. Many people have

ideas about the resurrection of Jesus that are not based on the Scriptures at all but upon paintings, Church windows, holy cards, popular stories, and even Hollywood movies.

Some people seem to want to place their Easter hope in the Shroud of Turin. If this much discussed linen cloth is indeed the burial cloth of the Lord, then there is every reason for Christian people to treasure it. But there is no scientific test devisable by human cleverness that will prove or disprove the resurrection of Jesus by studying the Shroud. Whether the Shroud is "authentic" or "unauthentic" it is not and cannot be the object of Easter faith. Our faith is in the living Lord.

The resurrection of Jesus is not a scientific problem. It is the radical sign of the mystery of God's unending love for Jesus Christ and for those who die with Him.

Catholics and other Christians today do not seem to speak about their Easter faith very much. Many seem to have very different ideas about the real meaning and truth of Easter, the resurrection of the Lord and the promise of our own future resurrection.

In the light of the advances in modern science, some Christians seem to think that whatever is not scientifically demonstrable and whatever is not a part of the experience of everyday life cannot be taken seriously by modern men and women. That Jesus could have broken the bonds of death seems unreasonable to the "modern mind," so they consider the resurrection is at best some kind of religious legend or "myth." In their view the real and lasting truth of Easter survives the "unbelievable" details of the resurrection story. They argue that the resurrection need not concern us with the body of the crucified. We should focus on God calling us to new hope, new beginnings, the freshness of spring, and the indestructibility of human goodness.

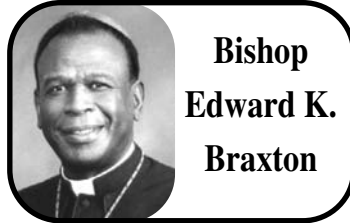
In contrast, there are other Christians who apparently believe that Christ's resurrection was a literal resuscitation of a dead body. They think, contrary to the testimony of scripture, that Jesus returned to human life just as He was before the crucifixion. They think of the resurrection of Jesus in al-

most magical terms. "Coming back to life" was the way Jesus proved that everything he said was true. There is no distinction made between God the Father raising up Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ and Jesus raising of the only son of the widow Naim, of the daughter of Jarius, or of Lazarus. Yet the significance of Jesus' resurrection is its unprecedented uniqueness. It is more than a mere return to ordinary life.

Still other Christians say that Jesus "rose from the dead" means that His influence is still being felt today. His message so galvanized the minds and memories of His followers that a world movement emerged that is still influencing people's lives 2000 years later. More than Plato, Socrates or Aristotle, the Buddha, Confucius or Mohammed, Michaelangelo, Shakespeare, or Beethoven, the spirit and ideals and thoughts of Jesus have served to exert a real influence on the world just "as if" He were really alive. Like Blessed John XXIII, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and Oscar Romero, Jesus "lives" as the incomparable reminder of the transcendent destiny of the human spirit.

Some Christians seem to be pragmatic, no nonsense "realists" who say: "I don't know if Jesus rose from the dead or not. The Church says he did, so I believe it, whatever it may mean. And anyway, what difference does it really make? What really matters is being Christ-like in your daily life, right? Follow the commandments, live by the beatitudes, pray as the Our Father teaches, love God with your whole heart and love your neighbors as you love yourself. This is what God wants. Is the resurrection literal? Symbolic? Psychological? Historical? Provable? Mythological? It doesn't really matter."

It is not difficult to understand how these and other popular misconceptions about the mystery of the resurrection have developed. However, as we shall see in the next column, none of them are fully compatible with the profound Easter faith proclaimed by the gospels and the teachings of the Church.



Bishop Edward K. Braxton



"Untie him and let him go."

(This page paid for by the Diocese of Lake Charles.)

Fifth Sunday of Lent

Now a man was ill, Lazarus from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who had anointed the Lord with perfumed oil and dried his feet with her hair; it was her brother Lazarus who was ill. So the sisters sent word to him, saying, "Master, the one you love is ill." When Jesus heard this he said, "This illness is not to end in death, but is for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it."

Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that he was ill, he remained for two days in the place where he was.

Then after this he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just trying to stone you, and you want to go back there?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in a day? If one walks during the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if one walks at night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him."

He said this, and then told them, "Our friend Lazarus is asleep, but I am going to awaken him." So the disciples said to him, "Master, if he is asleep, he will be saved." But Jesus was talking about his death, while they thought that he meant ordinary sleep. So then Jesus said to them clearly, "Lazarus has died. And I am glad for you that I was not there, that you may believe. Let us go to him." So Thomas, called Didymus, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go to die with him."

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, only about two miles away. And many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him; but Mary sat at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. (But) even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give you." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise."

Martha said to him, "I know he will rise, in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus told her, "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me,

even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord. I have come to believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world."

When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary secretly, saying, "The teacher is here and is asking for you." As soon as she heard this, she rose quickly and went to him. For Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still where Martha had met him. So when the Jews who were with her in the house comforting her saw Mary get up quickly and go out, they followed her, presuming that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who had come with her weeping, he became perturbed and deeply troubled, and said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Sir, come and see." And Jesus wept. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him." But some of them said, "Could not the one who opened the eyes of the blind man have done something so that this man would not have died?" So Jesus, perturbed again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay across it.

Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the dead man's sister, said to him, "Lord, by now there will be a stench; he has been dead for four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus raised his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you for hearing me. I know that you always hear me; but because of the crowd here I have said this, that they may believe that you sent me."

And when he had said this, he cried out in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, tied hand and foot with burial bands, and his face was wrapped in a cloth. So Jesus said to them, "Untie him and let him go." Now many of the Jews who had come to Mary and seen what he had done began to believe in him.

John 11:1-45

Pope will not preside at Holy Week, Easter celebrations

VATICAN CITY - Pope John Paul II will not preside at any of the major liturgical celebrations of Holy Week and the Easter Triduum, although he does intend to deliver the traditional Urbi et Orbi blessing on Easter Sunday.

The Vatican released a full calendar of liturgical events for Holy Week on March 8. Although earlier schedules had called for the Holy Father to preside at major ceremonies, the Pope's hospitalization and surgery have forced a thorough change in plans.

As Holy Week begins on March 20, with Palm Sunday services in St. Peter's Square, Cardinal Camillo Ruini will preside at the ceremony, which will include the blessing and distribution of palms and a procession.

On Holy Thursday, Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, the prefect of the Congregation for Bishops, will be the principal celebrant at the Chrism Mass, at which the holy oils are blessed for liturgical use during the coming year. That evening, Cardinal Alfonso Lopez Trujillo, the president

of the Pontifical Council for the Family, will preside at the Mass of the Lord's Supper, with the traditional washing of the feet of 12 priests.

On Good Friday, March 25, Cardinal J. Francis Stafford, the apostolic penitentiary, will preside at the commemoration of the Passion, with a service including a Liturgy of the Word, veneration of the Cross, and Communion.

Cardinal Ratzinger, as dean of the College of Cardinals, will preside at the East-

er Vigil Mass in the Vatican basilica. And on Easter Sunday morning, Cardinal Angelo Sodano will be the principal celebrant of the Mass in St. Peter's.

After that Mass on Easter morning, Pope John Paul will deliver his Urbi et Orbi blessing and message at midday. The Vatican announcement did not indicate whether the Pope—who has been advised by doctors to spare his voice—would attempt to say the blessing aloud, or have a message read on his behalf.