

The challenge this evening, as I'm sure you can appreciate, is to somehow add meaningful words to a night already chock full of meaning. The ancient philosophers, in their desire to identify the root elements of the universe, settled on four – earth, air, fire, and water. The Church, in its wisdom, emphasizes this fundamental connection through the reading of the Creation story. We are asked to see the spirit of God infused in our natural surroundings, and to bring the point home, we start with fire. Fire is equal parts attractive, helpful, and dangerous. Interesting, isn't it? I suspect that many people view God in exactly this same way – attractive, helpful, and dangerous. But look what we do with the fire. Through the intercession of Christ, as represented by the paschal candle, the fire is accessed and spread from person to person until we all share in its light and warmth. Each of our own lives, lit by a candle within, become sources of light and warmth to the whole world, and that's exactly what it means to be the body of Christ.

In moments, we're going to access the next big element, water. Water, like fire, is attractive, helpful, and yes, dangerous. Is it any wonder that we use water as a symbol of baptism? Once again, a basic element is used to symbolize access to the divine life. Our catechumens pass through the waters just as the Hebrew people did the Red Sea, from slavery to new life. And, just as was true for the Hebrews, passing through the Red Sea does not mean that life is now easy. Yes, there's joy at first, which is good and correct, but the desert is still the desert, and the spiritual walk can feel like we're wandering around seeking the promised land, always just over the horizon. The journey is worth it, however, as long as you keep your eye on Christ. After all, he did say, "Follow me!"

Let's not forget earth and air, the last two elements. As much as fire and water are treated with cautious respect, earth and air are seen as modifying elements, containers for fire and water. Fire needs fuel and air to blossom. Water needs earth and air to contain it, as rivers and oceans, clouds and rain. Put it all together – warmth, water, earth and air, and we have the necessary elements of life. So we add them to our liturgy this evening through three products – bread, wine, and what's the third? Oil! Not motor oil, but olive oil, blessed and scented as sacred chrism for our confirmations. Products of the earth, grown and cultivated for our benefit, as basic as you can get – infused with divine meaning. The bread and wine are not just symbols, but have been co-opted by God to be the carriers of the essence of Christ – his very body and blood. The oil is smeared on the heads of our confirmandees, a sign of royalty and health.

Earth, air, fire, and water. A planet in the universe is not habitable unless all four are present. Our earth has been blessed with these in abundance – I don't think it was accidental. God set this world up for life, if we can only open our eyes and see it. Our purpose tonight is to make that connection abundantly clear. Fire, the light, baptism, confirmation, bread and wine made holy by the Spirit, a transformation into the very body and blood of Christ. He so much wants to lead us on the journey that he makes himself food for the journey. The best way to stay on the path is to consume the very object of our journey – the life of Christ.

We just heard the story of Jesus' resurrection. How does this fit into our celebration this evening? Simple enough. Just as earth, air, fire, and water are essential elements of life, there is a fifth reality. Death. If God can use earth, air, fire, and water in ways that bring forth life, why stop there? Why not a final transformation? Why not a final note of triumph? Why not a final depiction of the promised land? You can almost hear God the Father discussing this with Jesus and the Spirit. Here's an idea – let's remove fear, especially fear of death. Let's love them into complete unity with us. And Jesus said, "Here I am, send me!"

A friend of mine remarked the other day that the Catholic Church is very good at examining and commenting on the sin of the world, but often misses the mark when it comes to celebrating the

joy of a life with Christ. I think he's right. A few years ago, Pope Francis remarked that Christians who walk around with "the face of a pickled pepper" harm the witness of the Church. If you're joyful in your walk with the Lord, please notify your face. No, it's not about smiling all of the time. It's different. *Joy* is the right word, not happiness. Happiness is fleeting, temporal, always leaving you hungry for more. Joy is deep-seated, marked by security and hope. If happiness is winning \$10 million in the lottery, joy is achieved by giving it all away. Do you see the difference?

So here's the question of this Easter day - have you experienced the joy of resurrection in your life? Think about it. Here's a couple of examples I culled from real life people:

- One of our parishioners was married for over 35 years to the love of his life. And then, without warning, she sank into early onset Alzheimer's. The next five years were a painful witness to a horrible and irreversible erosion of the human mind. He drew strength from his faith and the Christian community as he cared for her as best he could. His wife finally passed away and within months, he was remarried. She is the new love of his life, and he tells me without hesitation that God sent her to him when he needed her the most, and this joy has stayed with him ever since.
- Another parishioner tells the story of a son lost to addiction. The irony of addiction, as those who have walked this walk know, is that the person cannot be helped until they surrender to the futility of their situation. It's called hitting rock bottom, and when an addict is on that journey to surrender, the only thing that loved ones can do is to pray that the addict hits bottom before the addiction kills them. The odds are about even – half eventually seek treatment, half never do. The son of this parishioner hit bottom and sought help. Recovery is not a goal to be achieved, it is a lifelong process of maintaining stability. This young man has been in recovery for nearly 5 years, and his life is now happy and stable. Joy fills her heart every time she sees him smile.
- Another parishioner tells the story of infertility, the frustrating, often humiliating struggle to conceive a baby. Later and later marriage in the present era has raised the incidence of this biological reality, and many couples are angry and depressed. Finally, this couple decides to adopt a child, and God blesses them with a beautiful baby boy. You know the rest of the story right? Nine months later, she conceives naturally and delivers a little brother. Talk about joy!

So what's your resurrection story? Where has God given you undeserved joy? This is the reality of Easter celebration. Jesus shows us that death is not an end, but a door. Jesus teaches us that every little death we encounter during life is actually a series of doors to be opened and entered. The spiritual walk is seeing these doors for what they are, and striding through them with confidence and faith. God's got this – there's no doubt. Yes, it may be painful, but the path is a transforming path, a path that opens us to new life – if we allow it to. You can always tell the path that God opens for us. It is marked by a challenge to our preconceived notions, a change of perception, an opening to new experiences, and joy on the horizon. Is something or someone pulling you into this new path right now? Look for it – challenge, new perception, new experience. God wants to give you lots and lots of joyful resurrection moments, not just one. So stop being so stubborn and just say yes! Happy Easter!