

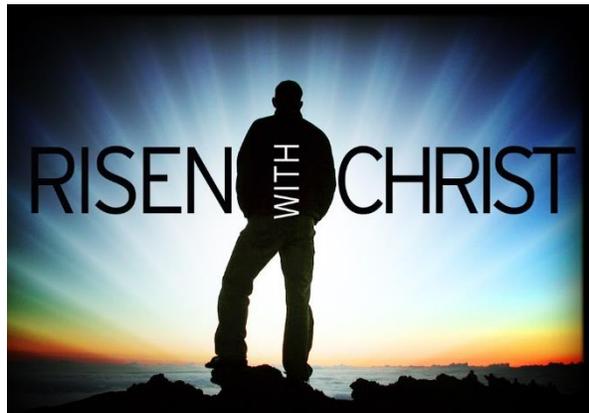
## **Easter 3B 2018**

**St. Peter's Cathedral of Helena MT**

**The Very Rev. Stephen Brehe, *retired***

Last Wednesday, before the 10:30 a.m. mass, I visited some old friends. I spent time in the memorial garden. Many of us have life-long friends or family there. I like to go there, touch the bronze plates, and say a prayer. Two niches, just a few feet apart, contain the mortal remains of the youngest person I ever buried as well as the oldest. The youngest was born with complications that made it impossible for her to live but a few months. The church bell tolled just one time the day of her funeral. The oldest lived more than a century, dying full of years. The church bell tolled 103 times for her funeral.

We are journeying through the Easter season right now, so a walk through a memorial garden or cemetery is especially appropriate. Easter celebrates God's victory over death and diminishment. Not only for Jesus. But for all who believe in him. Even after a bronze nameplate or tombstone is placed over our mortal remains, we affirm more lies ahead.



During Easter, the gospels give us resurrection stories. Today's comes on the heels of two disciples who have returned from their journey to nearby Emmaus, where they had met up with the risen Jesus but had not recognized him at first. Only when they broke bread together did they realize that they had been speaking with Jesus along the way. Then, having rushed back to Jerusalem, and just as they were telling the other disciples what happened to them, Jesus appeared. How did they respond? Did they recognize him? Not exactly. Like other Easter witnesses they were baffled, skeptical, even frightened at first. They thought they might be seeing a ghost.

What made it difficult for them to recognize Jesus? Was there something different about him? What about us? Will we recognize each other in the resurrection? Will I be able to recognize my brother? What will be familiar about Jim? Or different? Or for that matter, what kind of resurrection will little Sarah in our memorial garden receive? Or Edith, that 103-year-old woman? Most people want to know if they will recognize loved ones and friends in eternity.

The gospel accounts, as well as Paul's epistles, tell us that resurrection is transformative. The laws of physics seem to change. Jesus, for example, could come and go even when doors were closed and locked. Yet there was continuity with the Jesus that they had known. Most importantly, Jesus comforted his frightened friends, showed them his wounds, and even ate some broiled fish with them.

What do these things say about our eternity? What about us will be changed? What will remain the same? Will family and friends recognize us?

Let's start with some Christian basics. Resurrection begins now, not later. For too long Christians have believed that new life begins only when we die and go to heaven. That's "pie in the sky" theology. We believe new life begins when we receive our new identity in our baptism. When we stand at the font, we affirm that there is another life force at work beside a biological one. Biologically we are born, we age, we die. In baptism we affirm there is a spiritual life force at work, one in which we grow toward greater and greater life.

Life toward greater life is what we take into eternity. In baptism, God confers a new reality upon us, a new identity. Baptism anchors us in God's love that is stronger than death and diminishment. Hopefully that good news about our future affects the way we live right now. Instead of "pie in the sky," maybe we should think about how "sky in the pie" changes us in the present. In short, our Easter identity should shine through us. It should be visible in our daily lives.

In a thoughtful article in the *Wall Street Journal* just after Easter, George Weigel, a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, speaks about "the Easter Effect" and how it has transformed the world.<sup>1</sup> The "Easter Effect" is nothing less than Easter-filled people living out their resurrection faith.

Why did early Christianity grow against such great odds (and still grows against great hardships and dangers in some places in today's world)? Because they believed the Jesus they had known was raised; that he was truly alive in their lives. And, knowing that nothing could separate them from the love of God in Jesus, they could withstand whatever the world threw at them. They allowed their Easter identity to shine through their lives. And people noticed it.

This is the "Easter Effect" and it changed the world. Those early witnesses and later followers realized that Jesus' destiny was their destiny as well.

The "Easter Effect" led to mission. There was good news to spread. Early members of the Jesus movement became Easter energized people who, as Weigel puts it, were witnesses to something beyond comprehension yet nonetheless true. Their excitement about the resurrection empowered their new identity, their new destiny, their new life. It was recognizable and contagious. From a little ragtag band in the early first century, Christian church became a movement with millions in just over two centuries.

That brings me back to the matter of recognition. Will we recognize each other in the resurrection? Inasmuch as our baptism has bestowed upon us something that fundamentally changes us, it is fair to conclude that our lives will be significantly different and infinitely better. I don't think we need to sweat details that so often weigh us down in this mortal life. Will I still be bald in the next life or will I have a full head of hair? What continues forward is my new identity, not the hair on my head or lack of it!

Because most of us don't always live into that new existence, some people think we might need some remedial work after we depart this earth. Sort of like purgatory. I'm intrigued by the idea even though it's not Scriptural. But, quite frankly, I don't know. Perhaps better, we should stick with the Scriptures. They tell us that God loves us so much that he gives us a new identity in baptism. An Easter identity that is permanent. It does not end when we take our last breath. We are sealed and marked as Christ's own forever. Life is changed, not ended. Whatever happens next, it will be better than we can dream or imagine. We will, I think, recognize each other because we are part of God's family.

But here's what counts right now. Because we know that there's a fundamentally new life already at work in us, can we allow it to blossom and grow? Can we live into that new identity, which makes us brothers and sisters forever? If we do so, we're living into our Easter identity; we evidence the Easter effect in our lives. What does that identity look like? Living in God's peace. Resisting evil and repenting when we stumble. Proclaiming the Good News. Serving and loving all people. Striving for justice, peace and dignity for all.

That is what will endure and always be recognizable. But how wonderful it is when we see that Easter identity, that Easter effect alive and well while we still walk the earth. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Here is the link the to the George Weigel article in *The Wall Street Journal*:  
<https://www.wsj.com/.../the-easter-effect-and-how-it-changed-...>