
One week ago – in fact, just 6 days ago – at this time – Notre Dame Cathedral stood in all its magnificent glory – in many ways unchanged since it was completed 759 years ago – in the year 1260. More than a church – more than a landmark – Notre Dame is embedded in the identity of the French people – and that of Roman Catholics all over the world. +++ Later that day – 6 days ago – as the roof, the spire, and much of the interior of the great cathedral were engulfed in flames – the people of Paris could only stand and watch – silently – with tears streaming down their faces. They had no words for that sense of loss – no words to ask the question, “Who will we BE now – if Notre Dame is gone forever?” +++ There was only a Spirit of Mourning – of the loss of a loved one. There was only… the Spirit of Death.

Within the past month – in a stretch of just 10 days – three historically black churches were destroyed by arson in St. Landry Parish, Louisiana, an area where the Ku Klux Klan is operating and rarely held accountable for its actions. The son of a sheriff’s deputy has been arrested for the fires, which brought back memories of white terrorism that raged there 50 years ago, during the Civil Rights Movement. +++ And, once again, we are all reminded that Racism – so long pushed just below our sightlines, but now feeling empowered to assert itself again – Racism – is somehow baked into who we are as a people. A Spirit of Distrust for anyone who looks different from ourselves … a Spirit of Death.

Twenty years and one day ago – at this time – the students at Columbine High School, in Colorado, had begun what, for all appearances, would be just another, normal, school day. But at 11:19 am, Eric Harris and Dylan Kiebold closed the doors behind them and opened fire – murdering 12 students and 1 teacher, before taking their own lives. Since then, school shootings have plagued the United States – with at least 11 incidents claiming the lives of 4 or more people over these 20 years – in California, Oregon, Washington, Minnesota, Illinois, Texas, Virginia, Pennsylvania, Florida, and Connecticut. … As a people, we’ve not been able to put our finger on just what makes this happen here so much more than anywhere else:: – Does it have to do with Gun Laws, the state of Mental Healthcare, Bullying, Social Isolation, Drugs, or perhaps the influence of Music and Video Games? As always – we always get quickly sidetracked with our pre-loaded political arguments – demonizing one another – working up our own moral indignation – +++ all while the list of victims continues to grow. +++ And somehow this has become a part of who WE ARE… this Spirit of Death.

Right now – as we are gathered here this morning – a drug epidemic rages across our nation. Youth – young adults – elders – the opioid crisis will take anyone. And we all know that our own community has not escaped the tragedy. According to the CDC, on average, 130 people in the United States die every … single … day from opioid overdose. In 2017 there were 70,200 deaths involving opioids nationally – and the numbers continue to climb. It’s grown all around us until our communities – our schools – our homes now have a pervasive undercurrent of fear – and mourning – as though we are drowning… in a Spirit of Death.

Almost 2,000 years ago – on a night we observed just two days back – an innocent man was beaten, nailed to a cross, and left there to die. It was the culmination of public and religious leaders cowardly using the power of their office to shut down and shut up anyone who spoke out against them… anyone who challenged their abuse of the poor – anyone who posed a threat to their authority; +++ lying to manipulate the people into supporting their cruelty. +++ Such Power Brokers demean the value of a human being – using everyone else’s lives and deaths as pawns in their own game. And in their wake, they leave despair – hopelessness – the Spirit of Death.

How little human nature has changed in two thousand years. – In fact, since we first snatched the Fruit of the Knowledge of Good and Evil from the tree in the Garden, the Spirit of Death has pervaded our lives – the Spirit of Sin. +++ Over and over again, we’ve demonstrated:: if left to our own devices, there would be no hope for us – we just don’t know how to escape the Spirit of Death. +++ We know about loss – We know about betrayal –
We know about fear — we know about death… But we Don’t Know… how to escape it. Not by ourselves… Not on our own…

SO, Why am I talking about such depressing things on Easter?? – Isn’t this supposed to be the most uplifting day of the year: the day Mary Magdalene and the other women find the stone rolled away – Jesus’ body missing – and the two angels standing there?? Isn’t it the day we get to belt out the Hallelujah Chorus at the end of the service?? YES – this IS that day. BUT, the Spirit of Death has everything to do with Easter – because it is at Easter that the Spirit of Resurrection overcomes it. When the Spirit of Death pervades our lives (as it always does) – when we are overcome with hopelessness and despair – when the universe seems to be filled with nothing but hatred and loss – when we don’t know where in the world to turn, and so we start feeling desperate. When think we are that are stuck: THAT’S when the angels confront us as they did Mary Magdalene and her friends – asking US, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here – but has RISEN!” Christ offers more than just LIFE – he offers the Spirit of Resurrection – our way back home from the darkness of this world. It’s this Spirit of Resurrection – of rebirth and renewal – that God proclaims today through the prophet Isaiah: “I am about to create new heavens and a new earth… I will rejoice in Jerusalem, [which is where Christ was crucified and rose from the dead] … I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress…” Likewise, rebirth and renewal are celebrated by the Psalmist: “I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This … is … the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.” And so – through the Living… Resurrected… Christ, … the Spirit of Death – the powerful grip of sin on our lives – is defeated.

AND – his Spirit of Resurrection can redefine how the faithful live our lives – if we let it. It REFRAMES how we encounter the darkness of this world. The morning after Notre Dame burned, Cardinal Timothy Dolan, the Archbishop of New York, spoke with Savannah Guthrie on the Today Show. “What moves me already is the SPIRIT OF RESURRECTION – new life – revival,” Cardinal Dolan said. “It strikes me as – listen – if a tragedy like this has to happen, during Holy Week and Passover it happens – not bad – because the sacred message of both of those is from dying comes rising. So, maybe this is going to bring about a great revival. You already see it in the French people.” Savannah added: “I can’t help but thinking about what I was always taught, that when two or more Christians gather in Jesus’ name, that’s a church.” And the Cardinal responded: “Well said. The church building – church with a small c – is extraordinarily important, but as you said, what goes on inside is the church with a Capital C: Community, Faith, Prayer, Worship, Charity, Hope, Art, Nobility. Lifting up in the mind and heart to God through Jesus, that’s what goes on in the church with a Capital C – that can never be destroyed. And … that act of faith … is inspired … by this destruction.” THE SPIRIT OF RESURRECTION.

Rev. Harry J. Richard is the pastor of Greater Union Baptist Church in Opelousas, Louisiana – one of the churches the arsonist burned to the ground – He said this before they knew the identity of the suspect: “They didn’t burn down our spirit…” Preaching in the Masonic Lodge, the pastor said he wanted to deliver a message to whoever was behind the fires. He had an usher place an empty chair next to his lectern, a seat for someone he called “Mr. Firestarter.” “We forgive you, Mr. Firestarter. We love you, Mr. Firestarter. We thank you because you didn’t burn up our children. Our prayer for you, Mr. Firestarter, is that you meet our savior.” The SPIRIT OF RESURRECTION.

In this world that we are given to make our homes, we will always face the realities of hardship, sin, and death. Made in the image of God, our imperfect reflection of God’s nature is part of what makes us human. And so, Violence, it seems, will always be with us. … We have no answer for what drives some to take up an automatic weapon and commit acts we can barely comprehend. … We have not found the social, medical, and psychological alchemy to put an end to addiction and disease. Our world is
broken. +++ But the GOOD NEWS is, by his own Resurrection, Jesus Christ removes the stranglehold that the Spirit of Death once had over us. The Spirit of **Resurrection** will have the last word – it promises something **FRESH** after the flames subside – something **NEW** after the shooting stops – and something **BEAUTIFUL** when we reach out a hand in the name of Jesus Christ to comfort those who suffer. +++ **He Is Risen!** Christ has defeated death for us all. His Resurrection assures our own. +++ So, Do Not Be Afraid! Go boldly, ... proclaiming the Spirit of Resurrection in his name.

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.