

EASTER SUNDAY

All liturgical celebrations, not just Sunday Mass, have one theme. That one theme is the death and resurrection of the Lord, or what we theologically call the “Paschal Mystery.” You may have also heard the paschal mystery referred as the “Easter Mystery” or the “Christ-event.” When we celebrate a baptism, we are celebrating the paschal mystery. The candidate enters the baptismal font (the tomb) and joins with Christ in his death but also emerges from those same waters and so joins Christ in his resurrection. When we celebrate the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, we are celebrating how the paschal mystery was manifest in Mary. When we celebrate the feast of a saint or martyr, we are celebrating how the dying and rising, the paschal mystery, was mirrored in that person’s life. So, it is not quite correct to say, “Today we celebrate the 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time.” It is more correct to say, “Today we celebrate the paschal mystery on this 23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time.”

I am not doing the paschal mystery justice when I say it is only about the dying and rising of Jesus or only about our own dying and rising. It is more than that.

Mary Magdalene’s role at the empty tomb on that first Easter Sunday (John 20:1-18) and insights I’ve gleaned from Fr. Ron Rolheiser have broadened my understanding of the paschal mystery. While this mystery starts with dying and rising, it is certainly not limited to these. It is more like five stages or moments rather than just two. Let’s look at each of



these always remembering that the pattern, or paradigm, of Jesus’ life is the pattern of everyone’s life.

Stage One: This is Good Friday. Jesus really did die and so will each of us. For example, you died a thousand little deaths since COVID-19 hit; they are preparations for the great and final death. We do not like to think of this when we are young.

Stage Two: This is Easter Sunday. Jesus is given a new life. The emphasis is on both “new life” and “given.” From the tomb, Jesus is given life by God. Jesus did not raise himself from the dead; he was given life by God, the Father. He was not given back his old life, for that would have been a resuscitated life. He was given a new life, a resurrected life, a life that can never experience death again. This is true of Jesus and will be true of all of us, someday.

Stage Three: This is the period of 40 days between Jesus’ resurrection and his ascension into heaven. Scripture tells us that over the next 40 days the resurrected Lord appeared to the apostles and other believers. This is not 40 days of uninterrupted joy, although there must have been some of that, too. Rather, this was a time of *grieving* and *adjustment* on

the part of the apostles. They had a good day followed by a bad day where they just wanted to go back fishing, followed by another good day, followed by another bad day. This is the journey of faith with all its ups and downs. If you have ever received a troubling diagnosis from a doctor, or if you have ever buried a spouse or good friend, you know the following days are full of ups and downs. One day you are walking on water thinking you can overcome anything, and the next day you are sinking like a stone. In those good days and bad days, like the apostles, you were grieving your old reality and adjusting to your new reality. (Aside: 40 days does not necessarily refer to 40 calendar days. "40 days" symbolically means, "whatever time is required" or "however long it takes." The average apple tree takes four years to bloom and bear fruit; that is the tree's "40 days." You might take six years to fully grieve and adjust to life as a widow or widower; that's your "40 days"). "40 days" was the time the apostles had to ready themselves to let go of Jesus.

Stage Four: The Ascension of Jesus. In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, and in the Acts of the Apostles, Jesus' return to heaven is more or less formulated, but it is not spelled out in John's gospel.



In John's gospel, Jesus rose, ascended and sent the Holy Spirit all on the same day...Easter Sunday. John has a traditional resurrection story but no traditional ascension story. Instead, we have Mary Magdalene remaining at the empty tomb while Peter and John "**went back home**" (sounds like there was a hockey game on) (John 20:10). When the Risen Lord reveals himself to Mary, her immediate reaction is to try to embrace him. **Jesus said, "Do not cling**

to me because I have not yet ascended to the Father" (John 20:17). Without putting words in Jesus' mouth, it appears he is saying, "Mary, don't try to hang on to me in my bodily form, otherwise, you won't be able to receive me in my new form, my resurrected form." Mary wants the old Jesus back. Well, Jesus is back but not in the old form. Jesus, at the Last Supper, told the apostles that it is good that he leaves (physically), because if he does not leave, he will be unable to send them his spirit. Jesus seems to be saying the same thing to Mary at the empty tomb. If you keep clinging to my body, my physical presence, you won't be able to receive my spirit. And what I want more than anything else is to give you my spirit.

Stage Five: Pentecost. When you can let go of whatever you need to let go of, Pentecost happens. "40 days" or "however long it takes," is the preparation time given to each of us to help us let go. When you can let go of a loved one, and not stare everyday at their urn on the fireplace mantle, then Pentecost comes to you...then your loved one's spirit can come to you. It is the spirit of intimacy, far more powerful than physical intimacy, that wants to come to you. For spirit can enter places flesh would never dream possible.

An example, we are all familiar with, might help—the aging process. At 85 years of age, your youth is dead but you are not. You die to the fact that you can no longer do all the things you once did in your youth. Anti-aging creams and face lifts only promise temporary “resuscitations,” the promise of a life that once was, is no more, and can never be again. Something in you, but not you, has died. You hunger for resurrection; resuscitation will not do. (Stage 1).

God has given you a new life, the life of an 85-year old, a life packed with wisdom, not the life of a 35-year old. You are grateful for having experienced so much over 85 years. You have the life of an 85-year old but not yet the spirit of an 85-year old. You hunger for the chance to put together life and spirit (Stage 2).

You grieve the loss of your younger life and you adjust to life, perhaps the adjustment of now living as a widow/widower. It is the life of many your age. This is a hard stage and the paschal mystery can get blocked here. What blocks it are the words: “if only.” If only I was young again. If only I had the chance to go to university. If only I didn’t have arthritis. If only my children would visit me. Grieving, who we no longer are and adjusting to who we now are, is difficult (Stage 3).

Now you let go of your grief. You look to heaven with open hands. You let go of all the thoughts that begin with “if only” and allow them to ascend to God in heaven. (Stage 4).

Finally, with those same open hands you are able to receive the Spirit. As an 85-year old, you receive the spirit of an 85-year old, not the spirit that was given to you when you were 35 years old (Stage 5).

Good spirituality tries to put spirit and life together, so that at 85 years old we can receive the spirit appropriate for an 85-year old and pray 35-year old’s receive the spirit appropriate to them. The Spirit is not generic. Plunk. One size fits all. Rather, St. Paul tells us that the Spirit is given to us in different ways according to the needs we have at different stages of life.

So, the Paschal Mystery encompasses more than just dying and rising. It is about dying, rising, grieving/adjusting, letting go, and receiving. This is the Mystery that formed the pattern of Jesus’ life, the Mystery that raised Jesus from the dead, and the Mystery living in you this very moment.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Fr. Paul". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "P".