

Easter Vigil
April 4, 2015
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It was Wednesday of the Holy Week when, in 1945, 70 years ago, the Russian troops occupied my hometown Gyor in Hungary. That year, the date was March 28, my sister Eva's birthday. She was nine years old, my brother Eugene was still a toddler, I was 13. That day early in the morning, we fled with our parents from our home and moved to the basement crypt of the Carmelite Monastery which was located just across the street from our house. Hundreds of other people crowded in that church basement. The church/monastery was at the shore of a river and close to two bridges which the Germans exploded about at 8am. It sounded like a tremendous earthquake. The Russians came about 10am. One of the monks spoke Russian: he tried to deal with the soldiers, not letting them down in the basement. First the Russians just asked for some wrist watches (they were crazy about watches), but later they insisted to come down in the basement. Women tried to make themselves look as old and ugly as possible. The Russians walked around the crowded basement (they were looking for German soldiers), stole a few more watches and left. We stayed in that basement for a full week. The concrete floor was covered with mattresses but some people slept in the empty tomb-holes. The food situation and the restroom situation were disastrous. (There was no running water. Fortunately, in the monastery courtyard there was an old well: that was the only water supply for hundreds of people.) In the city, there was widespread looting and raping. After the siege, utter misery: no power, no water, no gas, most houses in ruins, no food available. That year, we spent the Holy Week and the Pascal Triduum in that basement crypt. There was an altar there and the Carmelite Fathers celebrated the whole Holy Week liturgy in that crowded place, including the Easter Vigil service and the Easter Sunday Mass. The location itself was eerie: the dark and humid basement, lit only by a few flickering candles, the situation was tragic: nobody knew whether their family members were alive or dead, whether their homes were still habitable or in ruins, the total lack of the most essential supplies and commodities, the absolute devastation of the whole country, the utter void and emptiness and hopelessness after a lost war, a bleak day seemingly without a tomorrow. This was indeed "ground zero." And in this blackness and darkness, locked up with the dead of the

crypt, we were trying to sing with weak voice, through our tears that, in spite of everything, Christ is risen, Alleluia! Hope against hope, hope in the hopelessness, the news of Christ's resurrection ignited a flickering faith in the hearts of the congregation that there will be new life, there will be a tomorrow, there will be a new beginning. The bright light coming from the empty tomb penetrated the darkness of the crypt and planted the awareness in the minds of all present that we are not alone, everything is not lost, because Christ is risen, Christ is alive, the risen Christ is with us, we should not be afraid. In this place of the dead we heard the comforting words of life: "Awake, O sleeper, and rise from the dead, and Christ will give you light".

On the first Good Friday and Holy Saturday, the situation of the apostles was not much brighter than in that dark place of the dead. The Master was dead and they themselves were in danger of being arrested. All their hopes were frustrated. What a beautiful dream it was! Jesus spoke differently than those old chief priests or the Pharisees with their insistence on hundreds of minute details of the Law. Jesus' words were indeed spirit and life. But as beautiful as Jesus' message and teachings seemed to be, as inspiring as His healings and other miracles had been, as heart-warming as the enthusiastic crowd of Jesus' followers appeared, with the death of the Lord, all this was over, no light, no future were visible on the horizon, just the black mouth of an endless, dark tunnel. These men, the apostles, built their whole lives on Jesus, they believed in Him, they left everything and were ready to give up everything for Him, to become His disciples, His friends, fishers of men, to do anything for Him, and now He died with a horrible death. He was a total failure. They must have felt deceived, cheated and abandoned; just imagine what bitterness and disappointment were eating their souls. They withdrew; they were locked up in the Upper Room, still together but isolated from each other and lonesome in spirit. They felt that the stone that covered Jesus' tomb was weighing on their chest. All hope was gone.

But when the Sabbath rest was over, something happened. Women went to the tomb to embalm the body of the Lord. Who will remove the heavy stone from the entrance, they wondered. But when they arrived to the tomb in the garden, they were shocked to see that the stone was removed, the tomb was open and the guards were gone. What happened? Someone stole the body of Jesus? Even the body, this last trace of the Lord's presence was now taken away from them? But stepping inside the tomb, a heavenly apparition received them. Who was he, an angel or a ghost? The women were totally confounded. What was happening? The apparition spoke to them. "Do not be afraid," he said, using the favorite words of St. John Paul

II. And he continued: “You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, the one who was crucified. He’s not here. He has been raised.” And he gave them instruction to go to the apostles with a message. The women did not understand a thing of what they had been told. What did it mean that He has been raised? The same women were present on Calvary Hill at the cross, they saw Jesus dying, they saw the soldier piercing His side with a lance. Jesus was the deadest of the dead, when He was taken down from the cross, how could He be raised? Such things just don’t happen. Nothing what the women heard and saw made any sense. Or...? Or maybe the impossible really happened? A dead and buried person rose from the dead? Maybe, just maybe, is Jesus indeed alive? By that realization, their fear was changed into excitement. They must hurry to report to the apostles all of what they had witnessed. They were running back to the Upper Room, then Peter and John were running to the tomb, and they found everything as the women told them. First Peter entered the tomb, John followed him, and, all at once, he believed. The resurrection was a reality but it was also a matter of faith. Jesus proved what He told Martha at the tomb of Lazarus: “I am the resurrection and life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live” (Jn 11:25). The news of Jesus’ resurrection spread, and this faith became the rock foundation of the Church on which, after the ascension of Jesus and the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the Christian community was built. After that, there was no stopping of the growth of the Church, no persecution, no teachers of error were able to forestall it, it continued to grow, even through a number of crises and setbacks, until it reached this present year of 2015 when the Christian community is as living, vigorous and dynamic as on the day of Pentecost. We are witnesses of the resurrection in the 21st century; with our lives and voices, with the smile of our face by our generous charity, we have to proclaim constantly and everywhere that Christ is risen, Alleluia.

Amen.