

Easter A – Fr. Val Handwerker

April 16, 2017

Cathedral

Noon

Theme: Instead of looking at our fears, looking at our hopes in the Risen Jesus!

We just heard these words from the Easter Gospel:

“And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven, rolled back the stone, and sat upon it.”

If only that angel had taken a selfie on that first Easter morning!

St. Matthew’s Gospel explicitly tells us that an angel rolled back the stone from Jesus’ grave—earlier, we are told it was a **“huge”** stone—and the angel sat on top of the stone. Can you imagine how that angel looked on that first Easter? The angel plopped himself on top of the huge stone. What do you think? Did the angel lean back against his wings and bask in the early streaks of dawn that first Easter Sunday?

Friends: What one sees depends on where one sets up shop.

In the story the women who came to visit the grave—well, they kept looking at the tomb—now empty. They were petrified, and the angel tried to calm them down, **“Don’t be afraid!”** The same with the guards: Jesus was already raised up, but they were acting **“like dead men.”** They were looking at their fear.

What one sees depends on where one sets up shop.

You see, the angel on top of the huge stone points us away from the empty tomb in order that we see clearly because of Jesus’ Easter victory. The angel, with his legs leisurely crossed, enjoyed the view on top of that huge stone. **“Don’t be afraid,”** that angel still reassures us today, enticing us away from staring at our fears. Instead, it’s clear what direction that angel is pointing us to look toward.

Friends: We call today “Easter.” We’ve got to look toward the east—that’s the direction the angel still points us. It’s how we got that name **“Easter.”** One of the great church preachers, named Origen, way back in the middle of the third century—preached in these words: *“You are invited then to look always to the east: it is there that the sun of righteousness rises for you; it is there that the light is always being born for you...”* (1)

I tend to focus on my fears. The Easter angel, with a great view atop that stone, instead keeps pointing us to **“the Morning Star who never sets,”** (2) that is, the Risen Jesus victorious over death and sin.

As a priest, I’ve been repeatedly encouraged by parishioners who wouldn’t stare at their fears but, even when they faced hard times—even death—they kept looking at their hopes.

More than three years ago, a parishioner was driving his car with his wife sitting next to him. Stopped at an intersection, suddenly he lost consciousness. A few days later he was diagnosed with serious brain cancer. This parishioner underwent brain surgery within a month’s time of his diagnosis. A handful of days prior to the surgery, one Sunday he and his wife came up at Communion—in line with other parishioners to receive the Body and Blood of Christ, as they had done Sunday after Sunday. You know the rhythm, as each person comes up in procession, the priest or Eucharistic minister says, “The Body of Christ.” Then, each of us says, “Amen,” signifying our faith.

When this parishioner came up and stood before me for Communion, before I could say anything, he looked me in the eyes and said, clearly, “I am not afraid.” I was stunned, and haven’t forgotten what he said. It became a mantra of his—even up to the time when he died. You see, he kept looking at his hopes—anchored in the Risen Jesus, alive within him...and among us still!

Friends: What one sees depends on where one sets up shop. That angel atop of that huge stone has a great view. That angel points us away from our fears—and instead—points us to the East, that **“Morning Star who never sets,”** the Risen Jesus.

Happy Easter—always beckoning not to focus on our fears...always calling us to look toward our true hopes!

(1) Origen, quoted from a homily on Leviticus, Hom. 9,5,10: PG 12, 515. 523. This is given in the breviary under Monday of the Fourth Week of Lent.

(2) This is from the ending of the Exultet, sung during the Easter Vigil.