

**Homily for the Mass for the Sports Ministry Conference
March 31, 2016**

**The Athenaeum of Ohio, Mount St. Mary's Seminary of the West
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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

When I was in high school, I took up running. My reason for running was not to compete as a member of the track or cross-country team. For me, running was a means to an end, or actually, a means to two ends. First, I had been reading about the cardiovascular benefits of aerobic training, and with a history of heart disease in my family, I thought it would be beneficial to take up running to stay healthy. Second, running would be the means to stay in shape so I could play my favorite sport, which, of course, is hockey. Then, the more I ran, the more running took on a life of its own. Eventually I took up marathon running, and last October I ran my twenty-first marathon in twenty-one years.

Now, a marathon is 26.2 miles, which is a long way to run, so I was really impressed when I heard about the distances people walked on the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela in north-west Spain where people

come to visit and pray before the tomb of Saint James, the first of the apostles to suffer death for being a follower of Christ. For well over a thousand years multitudes of people have made this pilgrimage travelling on foot, some covering a thousand miles across Europe.

One man who walked the whole way was Mark Hoare. His pilgrimage began in September 2000 in central France. Mark was then in his twenties and the idea had been inspired by a friend who had walked part of the way in Spain and had described the “ever-changing landscape whose changes somehow reflected the spiritual journey of pilgrimage.” As a painter, Mark was captivated by the novelty of painting a “spiritual journey” even if, at that time, he wasn’t sure what it meant or how it could be done. The result is a remarkable book, *A Painting Pilgrim: A Journey to Santiago de Compostela*. Each day is recorded and each day he paints, sometimes two or three times, even when it rains (quite often torrentially), or snows, or is bitterly cold. One hundred and thirty beautiful paintings accompany the text. He is a pilgrim in search of faith, as he says, “wanting but struggling to open my heart.”

In the dark hours after the crucifixion the disciples would have known exactly the meaning of those words. Jesus had been put to death; he was

gone, laid in a tomb. Was this the end? Did anything have meaning anymore? They still wanted to believe in him, yet they were struggling to open their hearts.

There is a quiet contrast between those dark hours and the early morning that heralded the dawn of the first Easter Day. It was then that Mary Magdalene and the other women disciples went to the tomb and found that it was empty. Mary believed that the body of Jesus had been taken away. When she ran to tell Peter and John what she believed had happened, she sought the help of men whose individual behavior had been very different at the time of Jesus' trial and crucifixion. Peter had denied three times that he even knew Jesus, but John had stayed close to the cross and remained with Jesus to the end, as had Mary, the mother of Jesus, and her sister Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene herself. But now, united in grief, Peter and John run to the tomb, see the burial clothes and believe what, until then, they had failed to understand: "that he must rise from the dead." For all of these disciples the truth of the resurrection dawns upon them slowly. According to John, it comes to Mary Magdalene in a uniquely personal way when a little later in the Gospel she remains at the tomb, weeping, and sees a man, whom she supposes to be the gardener.

Only when He speaks her name does she realize that He is Jesus.

No one witnessed the resurrection itself, but Christ in His love sought out the disciples, opened their hearts and reawakened their faith by appearing to them, risen from the dead. The change that then came about in his followers was a new beginning, inexplicable in human terms, for it was a glimpse of the world to come when we shall see God “face to face.” In the words of St. Bede: “Christ is the morning star who when the night of this world is past reveals to his saints the eternal light of life.”

The readings this week seem to reflect a sense of hurrying: women running in fear from the empty tomb, Mary Magdalene running to tell the apostles that the tomb was empty where the body of Jesus had been laid. Peter and John then run to the empty tomb to see for themselves. In today’s reading from the Acts of the Apostles, people hurrying in amazement to Peter and John after the crippled man had been cured.

Running excitedly but with a purpose is indeed a fitting response to the experience of Christ’s resurrection. If we truly believe that the empty tomb is not some trick, that the body of Jesus had not been stolen or hidden, but that Jesus indeed had risen from the dead, then we cannot just sit back complacently or amble along indifferently as if nothing unusual

had happened. The resurrection of Jesus changes the lives of us who are believers, spurring us on to run the course of our lives with the excitement of knowing that something miraculous has happened, so extraordinary that we are compelled to follow the way that the Lord has shown us and invite others to join us on this spiritual journey to a most remarkable destination that is the fulfillment of our fondest dreams.

The risen Lord appears to those who have received the gift of faith, that gift of the Holy Spirit which brings us into a relationship with Jesus. It enables us to see beyond what is immediately obvious into the world of God, where we can experience a whole new life. St. Paul expresses this experience of faith in terms of death and rebirth. When we believe in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, we are enabled to die to the things of this world and come alive to the things of God. All that used to be important to us is no longer so. Our whole sense of values changes, because our life is now hidden with Christ in God. We begin to see with the eyes of Christ so that we can know His Father as our Father and love others as He has loved us.

Like the disciples, however, we have to grow in our faith. Like them, we have to follow the call of Jesus, to listen to His word, to allow a

relationship with Him to develop. Without Jesus, our world is an empty tomb. Today let us open our hearts to the gift of the Spirit who will enable us to see what is not visible to the eyes of our body, and to believe that the Lord is truly risen.

The Gospel of Saint Luke tells how the women who found the tomb of Jesus empty ran to tell the apostles. We are told that the women's story seemed like nonsense, and so the apostles did not believe them. "But Peter got up and ran to the tomb, bent down, and saw the burial cloths alone; then he went home amazed at what had happened." When the people hurried to Peter and John after the cure of the crippled man, Peter asked, "You children of Israel, why are you amazed at this?" (Acts 3:12). In today's Gospel, when the Risen Lord appeared to the disciples of Jesus and stood in their midst, we are told that "they were startled and terrified," and they were "incredulous with joy and were amazed" (cf. Luke 22:35-48).

Although Peter and the other disciples were amazed by what they saw, amazement is not the same as belief. Indeed we are told that they were "incredulous," which means: not believing. But they came "to recognize Him in the breaking of the bread." Eventually Peter and the other apostles, even the "Doubting Thomas," would come to believe in the

Risen Christ, and that belief changed their lives. We might ask ourselves: are we only amazed at this story of the resurrection? Are we only amazed at the doctrine that the consecrated bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist? Or does our response go deeper than mere amazement? Amazement, after all, does not count as faith; faith is something altogether different. Faith is what makes us holy – and saves us. Now that is amazing!

May God give us this grace. Amen.