

**Homily for Easter Morning Mass
April 1, 2018**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Two of the universities that I have attended qualified for the final four in the National Collegiate Athletic Association playoffs in their respective sports. My undergraduate degree in college seminary is from Loyola University Chicago, which played last night in the semi-final game of the NCAA Division I Men's Basketball Tournament vs. Michigan University. Although they lost, they certainly had an exciting season! My graduate MBA degree is from the University of Notre Dame, whose hockey team will play next Thursday in what they call the "Frozen Four" of the NCAA Division I Men's Hockey Tournament, also against Michigan.

Of course, many people, including me, watch major sporting events like these, in person as well as on television. Last year, 72,678,797 people in the United States attended Major League Baseball Games in person.¹ 22.2 million viewers watched the final game of last year's World Series of

baseball.² The New England Patriots' winning of the National Football League's Super Bowl of 2015 currently holds the title of most-watched ever with 114.4 million viewers. This year's Super Bowl ratings were down somewhat, but with 103.4 million people watching the Philadelphia Eagles' 41-33 triumph over the New England Patriots, that is still a lot of viewers.³

Sports are not the only game in town in terms of huge entertainment audiences. Although movie attendance last year fell 6% from 2016 and reached its lowest point in over two decades, the number of tickets sold was 1.24 billion, still a lot of people.⁴

I mention all these numbers because watching entertainment events is a major national pastime. We like to sit back, relax, watch, and be entertained. Because entertainment is such a big part of our culture, however, there may be a tendency that going to church can fall into the trap of being viewed as another sort of another spectator sport. We come to church, preferably in a building with splendid architecture, sit back and hope to experience an inspiring homily and uplifting music. There's nothing wrong with any of that, in and of itself, since we do in fact seek to provide a worship experience in a beautiful church building with splendid architecture, an inspiring homily and uplifting music.

The problem is if we go home tucking the church experience away as something that is now concluded so we can go back to our usual daily routine. The experience of the first Christians makes clear that Christianity was not a spectator sport except for those who liked to watch Christians being slaughtered by gladiators and wild animals in the amphitheater, as depicted in our second stained-glass window on the north wall of our Cathedral, showing St. Ignatius of Antioch about to be martyred in the lions' den.

The first Christians who experienced the impact of the resurrection of Jesus were profoundly changed by this extraordinary event, as described in "The Saturday Essay" in this weekend's edition of *THE WALL STREET JOURNAL* by George Weigel, the biographer of Pope Saint John Paul II and distinguished senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C., where he holds the William E. Simon Chair in Catholic Studies. He describes what happened to those first Christians as the "Easter Effect." Mr. Weigel explains it this way:

There is no accounting for the rise of Christianity without weighing the revolutionary effect on those nobodies of what they called "the Resurrection": their encounter with the one

whom they embraced as the Risen Lord, whom they first knew as the itinerant Jewish rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, and who died an agonizing and shameful death on a Roman cross outside Jerusalem. As N.T. Wright, one of the Anglosphere's pre-eminent biblical scholars, makes clear, that first generation answered the question of why they were Christians with a straightforward answer: because Jesus was raised from the dead.⁵

Although it took time for the first Christians to figure out what the events of Easter meant—not only for Jesus but for themselves—as they worked that out, their thinking about a lot of things changed profoundly. Weigel lists several of them:

The way they thought about time and history changed. During Jesus' public ministry, many of his followers shared in the Jewish messianic expectations of the time: God would soon work something grand for his people in Israel, liberating them from their oppressors and bringing about a new age in which (as Isaiah had prophesied) the nations would stream to the mountain of the Lord and history would end. The early Christians came to understand that the cataclysmic, world-redeeming act that God had promised had taken place at Easter. God's Kingdom had come not at the end of time but

within time—and that had changed the texture of both time and history. History continued, but those shaped by the Easter Effect became the people who knew how history was going to turn out. Because of that, they could live differently. The Easter Effect impelled them to bring a new standard of equality into the world and to embrace death as martyrs if necessary—because they knew, now, that death did not have the final word in the human story.

The way they thought about “resurrection” changed. Pious Jews taught by the reforming Pharisees of Jesus’ time believed in the resurrection of the dead. Easter taught the first Christians, who were all pious Jews, that this resurrection was not the resuscitation of a corpse, nor did it involve the decomposition of a corpse. Jesus’ tomb was empty, but the Risen Lord appeared to his disciples in a transformed body. . . . A new way of being had been encountered in the manifestly human but utterly different life of the one they met as the Risen Lord. That insight radically changed all those who embraced it. Which brings us to the next manifestation of the Easter Effect among the first Christians:

The way they thought about their responsibilities changed. What had happened to Jesus, they slowly began to grasp, was not just about their former teacher and friend; it was about all of them. His destiny was their destiny. So not only could they face opposition, scorn and even death with confidence; they

could offer to others the truth and the fellowship they had been given. Indeed, they had to do so, to be faithful to what they had experienced. . . .

The way they thought about worship and its temporal rhythms changed. For the Jews who were the first members of the Jesus movement, nothing was more sacrosanct than the Sabbath, the seventh day of rest and worship. The Sabbath was enshrined in creation, for God himself had rested on the seventh day. The Sabbath's importance as a key behavioral marker of the People of God had been reaffirmed in the Ten Commandments. Yet these first Christians, all Jews, quickly fixed Sunday as the "Lord's Day," because Easter had been a Sunday.⁶

Our first reading today from the *Acts of the Apostles* describes this "Easter Effect" on the first Christians. Saint Peter starts out by saying, "You know what has happened all over Judea" regarding Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was not an obscure figure. His life, His miracles, His death and His resurrection were well-known. Secondly, Saint Peter says, "We were witnesses to all that He did." They ate and drank with Him even after He rose from the dead. Finally, Saint Peter reminds the Christians that they are not merely passive spectators, but that Jesus "commissioned us to preach to the people and testify that He is the one appointed by God as judge of

the living and the dead.”⁷ All of us who call ourselves Christians are called to do the same.

That message of being stirred to action pertains to us as much as it did to the first Christians. The account of Our Lord’s resurrection should not leave us mystified by this mystery of our faith or mesmerized in bewildered fascination by this extraordinary event; rather we are sent as missionary disciples to bring others to believe in the Resurrection of Christ. To be a disciple means to be a follower of the Risen Lord; to be a missionary means to be sent out to bring others to share this faith. Doing this, of course, is not easy, for there are many obstacles along the way.

Our scripture passage today from the Gospel of Saint John notes that, when Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early in the morning, while it was still dark, she “saw the stone removed from the tomb.”⁸

That stone is a metaphor. It represents all the obstacles to accepting Jesus Christ as our Sovereign Lord and our Saving Redeemer. Yet, for those willing to approach the tomb, the stone is rolled back. It takes faith to accept the resurrection. It takes faith to encounter the Risen Lord. It is God’s grace that rolls back that very large stone and beckons us to enter the realm of faith.

The Church's celebration of the Easter mystery is an act of faith; it is our coming to the tomb; it leads us to look up and see that the stone has been rolled away; it is our encounter with the rising sun that leads us to the Risen Son of God. Like the disciples at the tomb, we see that He is risen and we hear the most joyous good news!

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ <https://www.baseball-reference.com/leagues/MLB/2017-misc.shtml>.

² <http://deadline.com/2017/11/dodgers-win-world-series-game-6-ratings-rise-astros-mlb-fox-this-is-us-1202199065/>.

³ <http://deadline.com/2018/02/super-bowl-ratings-eagles-patriots-this-is-us-nbc-1202278181/>.

⁴ <http://www.latimes.com/business/hollywood/la-fi-ct-record-movie-ticket-prices-20180117-story.html>.

⁵ George Weigel, "The Easter Effect and How it Changed the World," THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, March 30, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-easter-effect-and-how-it-changed-the-world-1522418701?mod=searchresults&page=1&pos=1>.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Acts 10:34a, 37-43.

⁸ John 20:1.