



**EASTER SUNDAY (MARCH 24, '08)**

**FR. VINCE ALAGIA, SJ**

**ACTS 10:34A, 37-43**

**COLOSSIANS 3:1-4**

**JOHN 20:1-9**

***...SO NOW IT BEGINS***

**Franco Zeffereilli's film *Jesus of Nazareth* concludes with one of the Pharisees at Jesus' empty tomb saying, "And so it begins." And so the resurrection of Jesus marked the beginning of a new way of life for us centered in Jesus Christ who died and now is no longer dead, - and now lives forever.**

**This remarkable event had its beginning much earlier in eternity in the mind of God. Then came the Incarnation of Jesus. The reality of Easter is that God is not simply somewhere out there up yonder. He has come to us in the flesh and blood of human existence. In the wonderful consequence of this he has transformed who we are if we will but let him.**

**We believe that God became human in Jesus Christ. He chose to be like us in all things except sin. We Christians pose the world a pretty problem with this incarnation and birth of Jesus Christ, the God-Man. This may be one of the reasons why we drown our celebration in a sea of commercial inconsequence as well as wars and oppression of peoples.**

**If this were not enough, here we come with our Easter feast of Resurrection, of his, and promise of ours. Not only did God become human and live a human life, he died. And not only did he die, but he rose again in glorious flesh and blood.**

**We insist on the existence of God. And then we go and spoil it by proclaiming that God has not stayed at arms length but has come among us to embrace us with human arms. How can I say "spoil it?" Because it is hard to accept on purely human terms what we are asked to accept in faith.**

**We are a pretty hopeless bunch of people unless we are very careful. Even we have trouble with our God-become-human-who-died-and-rose again. We**

genuinely explain ourselves with one word, *mystery*, and this leads us to a faith believing in Jesus Christ and that all he said and did is truth. What is 'mystery?' Mystery does not mean 'not knowing,' 'not being able to know' something. *It means knowing something but not everything there is to know about someone or something.* And yet we *desire* to know more. We can touch base with it as we look at any love relationship. There is something about the beloved which draws me and I soon discover that I am not going to figure out everything about that person, but it makes no difference. There is the excitement of more to learn. That takes a leap of faith.

Jesus is the human face of our God, the physical expression of the infinite being. That is almost being too much for us to take in all at once, so we tend to divide Jesus in half. We say: Jesus the human ate and slept and played, while Jesus the God cured lepers and chased devils.

In this we miss the whole point. It is Jesus, the Man-God who had visions and headaches; it is Jesus, the man-God who made miracles and drank water. Jesus, to put it in mundane terms, is the skin of God. He is our God-man, our man-God. With our minds we try to grasp this, and let's not separate him for who he is, fully human, fully God. This step calls for the leap of faith and acceptance of mystery in our lives.

We are allowed to wonder: why this particular skin? Why did God reveal himself as a man instead of a woman? Why did God appear in the first century instead of the 15<sup>th</sup> or even now? Why did God come among the Jews instead of the Egyptians?

It is important to wonder even though the questions are merely academic now. Any different human situation would have us a very different God and of his relationship to his father and us. Had God chosen to be in early North America, he would have been confronted with the subtle/not so subtle genocide of the Native American Indian. Had he chosen to be in our time and, say, in Africa in the not too past he would have had to confront apartheid. And today itself if Jesus had chosen to come in the mid-east he would be confronting tribal, ethnic, and religious conflicts. He chose to come centuries ago in what was then

to us and much of the world an obscure part of society with its particular problems – and yet his lessons touch all generation and all peoples since.

I am not talking fantasy here, but the human reality of God, the fleshy surface of God check to jowl with us. God has chosen in Jesus which surface of himself to expose, which facet of himself to reveal, which qualities of himself to reveal, as God wished to choose to paint for our minds and hearts the self-portrait of God.

The portrait we have of God is more lasting a masterpiece than any great painter we know. Rembrandt chose to reveal himself in somber tones; Van Gogh in the sometimes strange but glorious colors of fields and skies and flowers. It happens that God chose to enter the human scene as this wandering, ordinary looking, small-time preacher. There it is. It is this Jesus who is our Lord risen from the dead, to die no more. It is this Jesus who offers us eternal life with him and the whole court of heaven. A friend described this image of Jesus which I found very touching because it speaks of all of the pain of being human found in Jesus and at the same time the resurrection. Jesus would be painted with a wounded brow but with beams of light bursting forth from where the crown of thorns once were pressed on his head. However we choose to picture him, paint him in our minds and on our hearts, it is not his passion and death that must ever take precedence over his resurrection.

If he had been a person of public consequence at all, what kind of impact for good would he have had in his own time and for all time? It can be fun and even a valuable exercise in learning to speculate who Jesus might have been. What we have, however, is more important than a flight of fancy. We have a simple laborer who became a preacher and ended up on a cross as a great disappointment and failure to many. Yet today he stands with us, offering the final glory of resurrection, - a share in his final victory over all pain and suffering. He stands in our midst to speak our name as he spoke Mary's, inviting us to listen and to follow him - and not be afraid.

St. Augustine wrote, "Give me a lover and he will understand the resurrection." And spiritual writers have been writing ever since that human love is the continual nudge hinting strongly at the divine love revealed in the

resurrection. For God the Father to say, "This is the Son whom I love" was for him to say, "I will not abandon him to death." John the evangelist is forever urging us to realize this in relating the resurrection events. Love is not confined by limitations of time and death; genuine love is committed and committing to the language of 'forever.'

Karl Rahner, the late Jesuit theologian, once wrote "*A strange, mysterious silent day with liturgy, Holy Saturday is a symbol of everyday life which is a mean between the abysmal terror of Good Friday and the exuberant joy of Easter. For ordinary life is also mostly in between the two: the Holy Saturday of our life must be the preparation for Easter, the persistent hope for the final glory of God.*" Even with Easter and the Resurrection, we still hold in persistent hope for the final glory of God.

I once had a retreatant making a 30 days experience of the SPEX, the prayer program which has a retreatant look at God's personal love of the individual and us all, of God's mercy in the face of our sinfulness, as well as the power of hope found in Jesus. It happened we were in the resurrection phase of the retreat when she came in to see me very upset, worried that she could not experience the resurrection – she could not walk with Jesus in the consolation of this great event. She did not see herself as able, nor called to move beyond the passion and death of the Lord. I had never had a retreatant who was not joyful at this moment in the retreat. Then it struck – and I hope with the action of the Holy Spirit – that this could happen because it was happening. *No matter what phase of life we might be in reflecting on the Lord in our lives, we can find ourselves faced with the pain of Good Friday and sometime emptiness of Holy Saturday because our journey is not finished. Yet it is the resurrection of the Lord and the promise of our own which gives us hope.*

And so indeed, the resurrection of Jesus marked the beginning of a new way of life centered in Christ Jesus who died but now lives forever. By virtue of his victory over sin and death, believers are offered a new perspective new hope. Jesus' resurrection changed forever the way we look at death; it changed the way we look at life, at this world and one another. With every Easter celebration we are privileged to affirm again, "And so now it begins."