

The Ascension of the Lord (Memorial Day Weekend) 2017
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
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We called it, “the park.” And it’s where we went to ride our bikes.

My brother and I would hop into the back seat of the car while mom loaded our small bikes into the trunk.

We’d stop and pick up Aunt Wilma and cousin Joey. Another boy in the back, another bike in the trunk.

Finally, we’d arrive at “the park.” We ate our lunch at a favorite picnic table, where we’d eat our lunch. Always the same sandwiches – peanut butter and Fluffernutter. Greasy Potato chips. And for dessert? Ring Dings!

Then, the boys hopped on our bikes and rode around an area nearby. It almost seemed like it had been built for fun bike rides. There were dirt ramps. Low dirt walls we could ride one, with little hills and valleys. Meanwhile, mom and aunt Wilma worked on their suntans.

It was always a fun day at “the park.”

But then the fun ended. In 1974, an announcement was made that the park would be closed for major renovations in preparation for the Bicentennial – the 200th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.

That’s when I first became aware of what this “park” was. It turns out that we were picnicking at Valley Forge State Park. And that place with all of those dirt ramps and hills where we were riding our bikes? It was one of the last remaining earthworks which the soldiers of the Continental Army had dug by hand to protect their camp in the winter of 1777.

If you go there today, that same earthwork is protected by fences and signs. Yes, as a child, I helped to destroy a national archeological treasure!

My brother and I had no idea what had happened in that place. To us, it was just a collection of beautiful fields and woods. As we rode our bikes all over that historic ground, we didn’t remember what had happened there 200 years prior.

The land where we ate our peanut butter was the same land where George Washington and his

small army starved through a harsh winter.

Where my mom worked on her sultan, Washington's troops froze and bled, because they had no shoes. They wondered if they should give up on this idea of independence, and go home to their families.

And those earthworks where I rode my bike? They were dug by hand, by men who could not feel their fingers due to the cold, desperately hanging on to an idea – freedom, independence, equality.

How many of George Washington's men died where I played as a child? We did not know. We did not remember.

It is so easy to forget. With the passing of time, we begin to forget the sacrifices that others have made for us, the sufferings they endured for us, the important lessons they passed on to us.

Here in Virginia, you can't go very far without walking on holy ground - ground hallowed by sacrifices when the great debates about slavery and state's rights overflowed into a civil war. Somewhere near here, people died in that conflict. But that ground is now probably covered by yet another Wawa. We forget. We don't remember.

Whether it's the now-lovely beaches of Normandy, or the forests of German, or a hundred other places where Americans have sacrificed, the passing of time makes it easy to forget. So this weekend, especially, we are called to remember.

And, in a sense, the Gospel calls us to a similar, sacred remembering today. Because, when it comes to Jesus and his sacrifice; when it comes to Jesus and his Gospel.... the passing of time makes it easy for us to forget.

In both the first reading and the Gospel today, Jesus has already made his ultimate sacrifice. He already died on the cross, and was raised from the dead.

And for a brief time after that – Luke says that it was 40 days – the risen Jesus remained with the disciples. Still teaching them. Still feeding and encouraging them.

But now it was time for him to return to the Father, to return to the eternity from which he had entered time when he was born in Bethlehem.

And, as Matthew describes it in today's Gospel, Jesus uses this last earthly conversation with his disciples to do two things: He asks them to *remember* the most important thing, and he sends

them to *share* that most important thing with others.

He asks them to *remember the most important thing*. This is the last time he will speak to them here on earth. So he uses this brief conversation to remind them of the most important part of his message.

And what is the most important thing? Jesus says: “Behold, I am with you always...”

Behold, I am with you always.

That is the most important thing we need to remember. The risen Lord is with us, always. We are never alone. We are never abandoned. We never face this world, with its craziness and its confusion alone ... we never face this world, with its fanatics and violence alone.... We never face this world, with its disappointments and challenges ... alone. We never face *anything* alone.

Remember. “Behold, I am with you always.” No matter what is happening to you, I am with you always. Remember. No matter what is happening in your family, your country, your world... Remember, I am with you always. Remember.

And if you remember, you will find strength, and courage, and wisdom, and meaning and peace.

But that gift is not given just for you to enjoy it. Jesus, before his departure, also says to the disciples, “Go, proclaim my message. Invite others to become my disciples. Baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit!”

Make disciples of them. Invite others to experience the gift, the grace, the strength which comes from the most important thing.... Jesus is with us. Experience the joy. Share the joy with others. Don't forget.

But I *do* forget. *Some* days. With the passing of time, with the busyness of the day, with the stresses and strains, I can forget. And I become oblivious to the fact that the ground I am walking on each day is holy ground. Holy because Jesus is walking the journey with me. Always.

On this Memorial Day weekend, as we baptize these children according to the command of Jesus, we have a solemn duty. We have a duty to teach these children about the men and women, the boys and girls, who have struggled and sacrificed to make this nation what it is... a nation blessed, but imperfect, a nation which has accomplished so much, and which is called to even greater service to humanity. We cannot let children forget. We cannot forget.

And we have a solemn duty, a sacramental duty, to help these children remember the most

important thing that Jesus taught us. He is with us, always. He gives us every gift, so that we can share it. We are alive, so that we can invite others to experience the joy of knowing and trusting the Lord.

Jesus is with you... wherever you walk. Jesus is with you... wherever you live. Jesus is with you, wherever your work. He's with you, even when you're riding your bike, oblivious to the holy ground beneath your feet.

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