

Easter Sunday, 2019
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael Renninger

I was like a child who had just lost all of his Easter candy. I was crying so much that mucus was running down my face.

I was four years old, and my parents were going out to dinner that night. They were leaving me at home... with a baby sitter. Now, they had left me at home before, but always with an aunt or grandparent to watch me.

But now, for the first time, they were leaving me at home with *a stranger*. Probably some psychopath they had found on "Serialkillers.com." When this stranger showed up at the house, I did what any self-respecting 4 year old would do – I threw a tantrum!

I pleaded with my parents – ‘don’t leave me.’ They promised that they would be back later. All I knew was that they were leaving me behind. *With a stranger*.

I don’t remember the baby sitter’s name. I do know that I made her life a living hell for several hours. At one point, she fed me a snack – food always calms me down! I gulped down the Oreo cookies and milk...which I promptly threw up all over the babysitter’s shoes.

I cried until I was exhausted. No one needed to wake me up when my parents’ car came up the gravel lane. I heard the stones. And, as I stood at the window, peering out into the dark night, I kept saying softly, “You came back! You came back!”

I was afraid I had been left behind. So, for me, some of the most joyous words in the English Language still are: “You came back. You came back.”

I wonder: on that first Easter morning, did any of the disciples of Jesus whisper those words under their breath? “You came back!”

Let’s remember – nobody expected the resurrection. Nothing in this life could have prepared those disciples for what they encountered in the cemetery that morning. The Gospel tells us that they simply did not understand what ‘rising from the dead’ might mean. Perhaps that is part of the reason that they did not expect an empty tomb.

But, on the other hand, from the beginning of the beginning, God has made it clear that He is in the business of life, not death. After all, what is the very first thing God does in the Book of Genesis? God creates... life. And if you read the scriptures with even a passing interest, you will see that God is constantly creating life, preserving life, restoring life, working to loosen death’s grip on the human family.

From the beginning, God acts to break the power of death. Yet, when human beings are convinced that God has abandoned them to the power of death and suffering – *God comes back*. And God comes back, to give us life.

When Adam and Eve found themselves hiding because of their original sin – *God comes back*, assuring them that he has not given up on the human family.

When humanity's evil brought about the great flood, and Noah and his family began to lose all hope for a future....

God came back. A chance to start life over.

The people of Israel were slaves in Egypt, calling out to a silent heaven for help. Just when they started to give up hope that God would ever help them, a man named Moses had his afternoon interrupted by a burning bush....

And *God came back*. And Pharaoh set the people free.

In a little corner of the Roman empire, God's people wondered if God had abandoned them, giving them up to the oppression of the Romans.....

But *God came back*. The virgin Mary heard an angel's message. In an insignificant stable she gave birth to a son. *God had come back*.

Throughout the life and ministry of Jesus, our Savior showed us that God always comes back, and God comes to give us life. Every action of Jesus should prepare us for the empty tomb.

In the person of Jesus, God came back to unravel death, and restore life. To the poor, the powerless, the sick, the sinner, the hungry, the oppressed – to the blind, the lame, the lepers, the lonely - he comes back.

Someday, we will live as though we believe this good news. God is in the resurrection business! Has been from the beginning! Once you see that, you have to ask yourself – how could the tomb be anything OTHER than empty?

God did with 'dead Jesus' what God wants to do with us, each day.

Easter is not just history – it is the mystery you and I are baptized to share. Like a panicked four year old child, there are days when I still tremble in the face of what looks like death's victory.

There are days and seasons when I feel as though God has left, for good, and I am stuck with no one but my grief to serve as a baby sitter. The point is, whenever you and I stand weeping at the darkened tombs of our lives, whenever you and I feel beaten down by

death, or sickness, or depression, or loss, or fear, or pain – whenever we feel powerless and abandoned...

God comes back.

+ Back in the 1970's, a priest I know was ministering behind the Iron Curtain. It was illegal for anyone to publicly celebrate the Eucharist. If he had been caught, he would have been sent to a Soviet Prison, or beaten, or worse. He and his struggling little flock felt, at times, as if there was no hope for them, or their oppressed country. But then - *God came back* – the Berlin Wall came tumbling down, and millions now have freedom and faith.

+ A friend was told, "Once a drunk, always a drunk." He felt like God had abandoned him to his addiction. But a co-worker handed him a note one day. A note saying, "I was a drunk too, and found a way to be sober, with God's help. Let me know when you're ready."

God came back. And my friend is in recovery.

+ A relative's wife left him after 13 years of marriage. Her departure ripped apart his heart. He went to his church, and screamed at God. Eventually he gave up, since God appeared to be somewhere else. But now, a few years later, he's found healing along the cracked edges of his heart, and is taking a chance on love, again.

God came back.

The male disciples in the Gospel did not believe the women when they first announced the resurrection.

Do *you* believe them? The wisdom of this world tells you that Death gets the last word, that life is full of meaningless suffering, that once we're in the tomb, we stay there.

But, for those who pay attention, there is a different message, a beautiful message. It is roaring out to us from the empty tomb. Jesus died. But he came back. *He came back, to give us life.*