**Tumbling towards Hope**

A Homily for the Easter Vigil, April 15, 2017

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When I was about ten years old or so, my uncles taught me how to body surf in the August waves of the Jersey Shore. It was a process of trial and error…mostly error, but I didn’t care. I liked being in the water. I liked trying to align my body with the ocean’s rhythms and power. And I loved the rush that came with feeling the force of the wave propelling my body when I’d caught it just right.

Sometimes in the evenings, my uncles and cousins would wait until the life guards had gone home for the afternoon, and then wade out a little deeper where the waves were bigger. By the time I was ready to join them, I’d gained a good amount of experience with getting pummeled by the ocean. It’s an important skill to learn: how to duck under the surface to blunt the effects of a wave crashing down. How to give up control in those moments underwater, letting the wave toss me around – trusting that the force, though strong, would also be brief, and then I’d pop right back up.

Until the time that I didn’t, and all of sudden felt sure that I was going to drown. The waves were particularly large that day, and there were a lot of them. I’m not sure exactly what happened, but I was definitely not in the right spot and a massive wave came crashing down on top of me. I ducked, and waited under the water for it to pass, but then, as I moved up to the surface to get some air, a second wave pounded down upon me. And then a third. Before I knew it was I was doing somersaults underwater and my head was crashing against the seafloor. Forget about giving up control – the ocean had taken it from me, and it was scary. The worst part was, I’d lost all sense of orientation -- and for a few seconds, I wasn’t even sure which way I was supposed to be swimming to get back up to the air. I had no idea if I was heading up or down…I just knew I had to swim.

I still body surf when I can. And I’ve come to think about body surfing as something of a metaphor for what it means to live an Easter faith. At its heart the life of faith we share is a willingness to keep going out into the ocean, sometimes riding the waves of life, sometimes being ridden by them into the ground – and occasionally being so flummoxed and tossed about that you don’t even know which way is up. The key is in those moments to trust that somehow God will turn us towards the surface, and to remember that our work is to keep swimming.

Because, my friends, the core promise of Easter itself, isn’t rescue – it’s re-orientation. Not the promise of escape from harm, but the promise of a future. Easter is God’s unfailing commitment to turn our hearts towards the new and transformed life that always awaits us, even in our most helpless or hopeless moments. Every part of our worship tonight reminds us that God’s desire for our renewal can never be consumed by the tempests tossing us about or churning within.

We see it in the Creation Story, where our first introduction to God in the whole Bible is as the one who can take even the deepest, most persistent chaos, and weave it into some kind of form – some kind of order that becomes capable of supporting robust and vibrant life.

We see it in the Exodus, where we are reminded that whenever God’s people find ourselves trapped by forces beyond our control -- so imprisoned by cycles of victimization that we’re unable to free ourselves – God will act and point us towards the way out. Across the threshold may lie a lot of wilderness before the promised land, but God will never fail to lead.

We see it in the Valley of the Dry Bones. Ezekiel shows us the remains of a once vibrant and promising nation, which has become so fractured and broken and scattered in all directions that it’s impossible to imagine it ever being united again. But God gathers the fragments, reorients them towards each other, unites them again into one body and breathes new life into them. God brings a renewed future to the even the most faltering, atrophied, and hope-thirsty nations.

Most of all, we see it in our Easter Gospel, the ultimate affirmation that God will never fail to point the way forward for us on the other side of collective failure and personal despair. The whole thrust of Matthew’s resurrection account is the reorientation of Jesus’ followers away from the tomb and ahead towards Galilee. The two Mary’s come to the tomb – but not because they expect to see Jesus. In Matthew’s telling, they knew the tomb was sealed and guarded; the stone still there; and Jesus body already anointed. They came because they didn’t know where else to go or what to do other than weep at the grave of the one they had loved and who loved them. And whether it’s the Angel of the Lord, or Jesus himself when he appears, the whole thrust of God’s action is to point these women and through them all the disciples, away from that grave, and towards their mission and purpose among the living.

It’s not that the two Marys’ grief for Jesus is wrong. If they hadn’t come to the grieving place, God couldn’t have urged them onward. Rather, it’s that whenever we find ourselves swallowed up by despair, our renewed sense of God’s presence with us won’t be found in our grief or self-loathing. It will be found when we are ready to walk away from the tomb and towards our future, however uncertain that path may be. You see, Jesus doesn’t meet the women at the tomb – he meets them on the road. He doesn’t see his disciples in Jerusalem, but in Galilee where their future mission awaits. And in our darkest times and places, we often don’t see God either. But tonight when we say “The Lord is Risen Indeed” we profess our faith that God is there anyway, turning our hearts towards love, towards hope, towards a new life of grace, so that when we’re ready to start swimming, we can trust we’ll reach the surface.

It is into this Easter faith, of falling and rising, of loss and renewal, of tumbling towards hope that we will baptize Andrew Presti in just a few moments. Andrew, your baptism will not stop the waves from coming down upon your head from time to time. It will not keep all the chaos at bay. And it will not give you a perfect faith or a blameless life. But it will protect you. It will protect you from despair and from disorientation. It will create an unbreakable link between your heart and God’s, so that when the waters overwhelm you, and you don’t know which way to go to reach the surface, all you have to do is keep swimming, and you can trust that God will point you towards the air.

This is the Easter attitude: a life lived in partnership with God for the sake of the world. It is a way of moving through our lives that expects God to show up on the other side of catastrophe and turn us towards a transformed future, even when we can’t see the way. In the struggle against despair, an Easter faith keeps us open to being surprised by joy, for nothing is impossible with God.

We are an Easter people. We proclaim a living God whose commitment to love and mercy and justice can never be killed. And when the world, as it does again and again, tries to prove otherwise, when the waves come crashing down, we help each other to open our hearts and get back in the ocean. We are not alone. We are no longer afraid. Christ is Risen, indeed. Alleluia. Amen.