

Why are you here? The obvious answer is: "It's Easter, Father!" But that really doesn't tell the whole story, does it? I would guess that we are really here for all different types of reasons. Maybe going to church on Christmas and Easter is just what you do as a family. Maybe you are going through a really tough time in your life and church seemed like the best place to be this morning. Maybe you come every Sunday and wouldn't miss coming on Easter. Or maybe you are here and have no idea why! Any of you teens in that boat? Whichever of these (or any other) boats you find yourself in, God wants to meet you today.

Think about your closest friend. Picture that person in your mind. Now think back to when you first met him or her. Can you remember your best memory with that person? I bet you can. All of us have those people in our lives whom we count as friends. Friendship is foundational, something we all need in order to be happy. I would bet that if our friends suddenly started becoming unavailable to us, those relationships would wither. Availability is one of the marks of a true friend.

As we gather on this Easter Sunday, we must ask ourselves one crucial question: is God a friend of mine? Is He? In your heart of hearts, you know the answer to this question. I can tell you this: God is available to you. He died and rose for you nearly two thousand years ago. Yes, He died for the sins of all, but not in a general, impersonal way. As he hung in agony on the cross, *your* sins were present to Him in His divinity: all of your lies, your gossip, your petty jealousies, all of those times you've taken His name in vain, and everything else. Your darkest moments. He saw it and still said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Jesus died to take the punishment we all deserve for trying to be the gods of our own little universes. And after He had suffered more than we could ever imagine, He died.

Today we celebrate what that death was all about. It was not just about paying the cost for our sins, but about bringing something amazing that

nobody could have imagined. Today we celebrate the fact that the same Person who died for each of us is definitively risen and alive. Do you believe this? The resurrection is the foundation of our faith. Without it, aren't we just a moralistic cult? If Jesus hasn't invited us into a new kind of life that is free from the chains of sin and death and destined for eternal joy, then He is just a failed teacher who died in the Middle East a long time ago.

But no, brothers and sisters, I stand before you as a witness that Jesus is indeed risen and alive, still with us today. How do I know this? Because I have encountered Him a thousand times over in my life, just like those disciples we heard about in the Gospel on the road to Emmaus. I have encountered Him in the example of faith in my family growing up, especially in my parents, who introduced me to Jesus and taught me to pray. I encountered Him in the joyful witness of the students I befriended in college whose hearts were on fire as Catholics with love for Jesus. Above all, I have encountered Jesus powerfully in the Sacraments, especially in the Eucharist and Confession, which have literally changed my life and led me to become a priest.

Over and over, I have deeply encountered the risen Lord Jesus in the Eucharist we are all about to share. Think about what happened with the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Jesus helped them to recognize Him through the Scriptures and then He vanished after breaking bread with them just like at the Last Supper. Why? He vanished from their sight, but remained with them under the appearance of bread! Both of these things will happen for us right here at this Mass. Right now, we are breaking open God's Word to encounter Jesus, and soon He will be with us substantially, right here on this altar! He is risen, He is available to us!

Remember what the disciples begged Jesus? "Stay with us, Lord." Is that our attitude every day? Do we want Jesus to be that friend who is always there to share our lives? This is what it means to know the risen Jesus: to remain with Him and to look for all of those ways He wants to encounter us

every day. Jesus wants to meet each and every one of you today with all of His power and grace. He wants to set your hearts on fire, just like those disciples on the road. As you walk through life with all of your struggles, pain, confusion and questions, He wants to draw near and remind you that He is always close, always with you.

Our call is to respond to His dedication to us, to be with Him often in prayer and in the Sacraments. If we remain away from Jesus in the Eucharist at Mass, we are mortally wounding our relationship with the risen Lord. The breaking of the bread is where He comes to us *most powerfully*.

Through the Church, He begs us to be with Him every week. Not because *He* needs it, but because *we* need it. Without this weekly banquet, our souls are literally starving! How do we respond to His weekly invitation? If you have been staying away from weekly Sunday Mass, the Lord is inviting you back today. At Communion, cross your arms over your chest for a blessing from the priest or deacon and then get to Confession as soon as you can to right that broken relationship. Jesus wants to abundantly heal all of us through Confession. So if you are in that boat, even if it's been years, seek out that healing as soon as you can! Remember, Confession is the doctor's office, not the principal's office. Come and be healed.

Today is a great day because it reminds us of the generosity of our God. No matter where we are in life--whether we've strayed far from Him or not, He wants to be with us and hold us close. He wants to be our dearest friend, the Savior and King of our hearts. He is with us right now and wants to draw even closer and walk with us more deeply than before. Jesus is risen and alive! And so I pray: *Alleluia, come Lord Jesus. Come with the power of your Holy Spirit right now to touch our hearts and assure us of Your presence. Help us to remain with You as You remain with us. Help us to be open to Your life changing grace, especially in the Eucharist and Confession. Let us be open to your healing grace to weed out all of those ways we hurt ourselves and our relationship with You and others through*

*sin. Open the eyes of our hearts to help us see You risen and alive, at work in our lives. I beg You to make us more and more truly disciples who follow You daily. I pray all this through Jesus Christ, our risen Lord, amen.*