

EASTER SUNDAY (April 17, 2022)

Even if it feels more like December and Christmastime outside, I assure you: we do indeed celebrate on this mid-April day the great feast of Easter and the wonderful truth that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. It's a great joy to be with all of you on this grand day, and we offer a special welcome to all of our guests from out of town—we are very glad you are here. I wish for all of you a most blessed and joyful Easter day and season and all the grace, peace and joy of our risen Savior.

We have been reflecting this past week on a few of Jesus' words preserved in the gospels, but our reading from St. John today does not give us any of those words. Rather, this passage focuses on Mary Magdalene, Peter, and John seeing that Jesus' tomb is empty: we hear no words from Jesus there, because the tomb's silence spoke firmly and loudly the reason for its emptiness. Four years ago in his Easter blessing, Pope Francis said that "Death, solitude and fear are not the last word. There is a word that only God can speak; it is the word of the Resurrection." Jesus, the Holy Father went on, "remained two days in the tomb; but his death contained God's love in all its power, released and made manifest on the third day".

That is a great truth: Jesus' death and resurrection contained the power of God's love in its fullness. That power of God's word, the word of Jesus' rising from the dead, is the first and most important reason for the faith and the Church we now have as well as the hope we have for eternal life and joy in his kingdom. The power of that 'word of Resurrection' showed itself, for example in the person of Peter. He bragged at the Last Supper that even if everyone else denied Jesus, he would never deny him. Except that later, out of fear, he denied even knowing Jesus not only once or twice, but three times. But now, as we heard in the first reading, Peter is boldly preaching the good news of the risen Christ without fear; this would ultimately lead to his own martyr's death in Rome several years later. The power of the word of Resurrection and of the Holy Spirit he and the others received at Pentecost, changed and strengthened Peter to be what Jesus had first called him to be: a fisher of men and the rock upon which Jesus would build his Church.

The history of the Church from its very beginning gives us countless examples of people whose lives were completely and utterly changed because of their own encounter with the risen Christ and the word of his resurrection. One very recent example is becoming more widely known with the release this past week of a movie titled "Father Stu". It's all about Stuart Long ("Stu", for short) who grew up in Montana and who, let's just say, was not anyone's idea of a 'good boy'—one of his schoolmates said "Stu was not a nice guy, not a guy you wanted to be on the wrong side of". He got into a lot of street fights and other brawls as a teenager.

He didn't grow up in any faith or religious belief; his first exposure to Catholicism was in a Catholic college in Montana that he attended only because he received a football scholarship. He went to Mass only because the coach required his players to do so; he saw the priest there in his clerical clothes and immediately thought of Johnny Cash ("Man in Black", you know...). Stu tried a number of jobs where his 'rough-and-tumble' ways came in handy—he got into boxing until a jaw injury ended that path, then worked as a bouncer in a local bar and later got into the acting and partying scene in Hollywood.

Then came the two events that turned his life around. First, he got into a serious accident on his motorcycle' that shook him up enough to get him thinking about what life was really all about. The other event involved his girlfriend who had become much more serious about her Catholic faith. At her strong suggestion, he signed up for RCIA and was baptized and confirmed in 1994. He and his girlfriend eventually broke up, after which Stu got a very strong sense of being called to the priesthood. He was accepted as a seminarian by the bishop of Helena, Montana. His newfound faith was genuine and it grew, especially after he was diagnosed with a rare disease similar to Lou Gehrig's disease—his muscles simply began to waste away.

He was ordained in 2007, but soon thereafter his condition worsened and he had to move into a nursing home. There his ministry really took off—he began speaking from his wheelchair at schools, parishes and prisons about his fatal condition and how the grace of God and the power of the crucified and risen Christ helped him find deeper peace and even joy in his suffering. When traveling became too difficult, he stayed at his care center where he began a new phase of his priesthood by hearing confessions and offering pastoral counsel to the increasing number of people who came to him. Even so, however, his old rowdiness could show itself every once in a while. He and another wheelchair-bound resident would occasionally face each other at opposite ends of the hall, then barrel down at full speed until they ran into each other. Can't you just see the nursing home staff look on with horror at such a thing?? Once a heck-raiser, always a heck-raiser, I guess...

Fr. Stu died in 2014 at the age of 50. In an interview a few years before his death, he said that he wished he was healthy, but that his illness may have been the best thing that happened to him. It became for him a chance to make his peace with God who is always, and I mean always ready and joyfully willing to embrace with his mercy the stray who comes to him. He said: "The struggle of this disease helped me learn to live the way I should have been living all along. It has helped me overcome some of my prideful ways. It's taught me a little humility. It's taught me about dignity and respect for others." Wise words indeed--sometimes it does take the proverbial two-by-four upside the head to knock some sense and some grace and some truth into us...

I have read that the "Father Stu" movie has a whole lot of very rough and coarse language as well as some graphic violence, so it's not for youngsters. If you don't care for that in movies, I wouldn't suggest seeing it. But the movie was made that way because Stuart Long's younger life was very rough and coarse and violent in a lot of ways. And in a way, that coarseness and violence helps us realize even more how the power of God's grace and the word of the resurrection of Jesus Christ can and does change the minds and hearts and lives of anyone—even those who we might otherwise think are hopeless cases. Fr. Stu came to know and live and rejoice in the power of the crucified and risen Christ, even and especially as his body grew weaker and his death drew nearer. That same profound faith, that same deep joy is available to every single one of us, no matter what crosses we or our loved ones have to carry, no matter what challenges we face in our nation, no matter what may or may not happen in Ukraine. All of this because Jesus Christ is risen from the dead—now and forever. How can we not rejoice and be glad??