

The First Day
The Great Vigil of Easter - Saturday, April 3, 2010
Romans 6:1-11; Luke 24: 1-12

"Today is the first day of the rest of your life." Most of us know that line, and now some of us won't be able to get the jingle out of our heads. It's supposed to give us encouragement to live *hopefully*, as if daily we are given a clean slate and are able to start over "without baggage;" and to live *purposefully*, as if we've survived a near-death experience and now ponder what we've been sent back to do.

Today is the first day of the rest of your life. So take a moment and think about it. What if the slate really *was* wiped clean: no points on your driver's license; no credit card debt; no legal record; no back taxes due; no failing grade on your report card; no shadow on that X-ray? What if there were no hurtful words that needed to be taken back; no awful mistakes you'd give pure gold to undo; no "coulda woulda shoulda" moments to eat at you and fill you with regret and shame?

Think about it. What if you really *had* survived a near-death experience? What *would* you believe you'd been sent back to do? Who would you tell that you loved them? Who would you apologize to? What would you resolve to change in your character to make you a better person? What would you finally feel free to risk trying?

But the problem with our little ditty, "today is the first day..." is that it isn't radical *enough*. The messy slates of our lives, our hearts, our consciences, *really need* to be wiped clean. They *really need* erasing; you can't just keep writing over the mess. Something has to interrupt that. Something has to stop. Something has to interrupt us *from the outside*, because chalk boards don't erase themselves. And of course if the slate really does get wiped clean, that means *something in us has to die. Be rubbed out. Get erased. Drown*. And that speaks more of a last day than of the first.

As many of us were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death.... Our old self was crucified with him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin.

At the Easter Vigil, we remember our own Baptism - and often witness the Baptism of a new sister or brother in Christ. That's really critical to understanding both this holy night, and Baptism. You see, Holy Baptism isn't just a rite of passage for our children. It isn't primarily something *we* may resolve to do if *we*, as adults, have come to believe in Jesus. It's not even like going to Weight Watchers or AA, when we know we need to make deep changes in our lives if we want to have a prayer of making tomorrow the first day of the rest of our lives. St. Paul speaks of Baptism in the passive voice: as many as *were baptized*; the old self *was crucified*. Baptism is something we *receive* -

heck, the way he phrases it, it's something we *endure*. It's done *to us*; Christ Jesus joins us to his crucifixion and death. It's drastic. And it doesn't just "wipe the slate clean." Baptism does away with the whole darned slate - what St. Paul calls "the body of death" - completely.

In a sense, that means that every newly-baptized person has undergone not a *near-death experience*; *they've actually experienced death*: the worst part of it, anyway. The part that means "finito; caput." The part that says "That's all she wrote." The part that separates us from God, life, and loved ones so profoundly that the non-existence it causes is worse than what there'd be if we never had existed at all. The part that sin scribbles on with its dark permanent marker: "Condemned; building to be torn down."

We've already gone through that part of death. We've done so because our Lord Jesus, who descended to the deepest part of death, has been raised; death no longer has dominion over him. In Baptism he covers us with his imperishable life and righteousness. Death, and its sidekick, sin, can't use a permanent marker to write on our slate any more; the slate is gone and the marker's ink won't stick to Jesus.

Today is the first day... not merely of the rest of our lives; today is the first day of God's new creation. Today is the day when God's Spirit moves over the dark, chaotic waters of our broken and sinful lives;

over the death-shrouded waters of this sad world; over the futile and fallible waters of this fallen creation that groans in travail. Today is the day when God's Word rings out: LIGHT! And that Light is Christ, the Son of God, the Light no darkness can ever overcome.

This new, everlasting "first day" isn't our doing; it's not the first day of the rest of *our* lives so much as it is the first day *of His life being lived in us*. The question does remain: what are we going to do with it? What *is* His plan, His purpose for this new life He gives us?

We are to walk in newness of life; to walk in the path of those good works the Father has prepared for us from the foundation of the world; to walk in the Spirit who has breathed that new life into us; to walk in the Light of Christ; to walk in ways of humility, love, and holiness. We are to walk to walk as newborn children of God's new creation, even as we still walk this sad earth, whose slate is graffiti-laden and cracked, and which longs for its own deliverance from bondage to futility and death.

And it will take forever to accomplish all of that. Every day from now on, into eternity, is God's First Day, given in his infinite love to us for the rest of our lives. Therefore let our constant song now be: *Today is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. Alleluia! Amen.*