

Faith Today

Down the Hog Back Road to Easter

By Father David Monahan
NC News Service

Memories of an Easter Sunday, a decade or so back.

This dawning Easter morning finds me twisting north on Oklahoma County Road No. 1. The Hog Back Road, the locals call it.

The two-lane highway is a tame roller-coaster ride across the hills of this thinly populated area. Today it is resurrection-glorious.

Spring green is beginning to catch hold this early April. The gnarled blackjack oaks — curmudgeons of the tree family — are loathe to admit any season's passing, but the locusts and the cottonwoods and the webby underbrush are converting. And the redbuds have blossomed.

For some 50 weeks of the year, the redbuds practice the extremes of modesty. Ordinarily they are nothing much to experience. But fitted by God with a magic inner clock, the redbuds annually celebrate Jesus coming forth from the tomb with millions of explosions of magenta.

Today the redbuds are singing a chorus of alleluias to me from the woods on both sides of the road. They are a delightful menace to safe driving.

My destination is the town of Luther, more specifically the mission Church of St. Theresa. Mass is, as always, scheduled for 7:30.

Luther is not a City with Pride or a Proud Town nor encumbered by any other of those anti-Gospel slogans. Luther is a humble place, populated by 1,159 citizens who haven't made it big, the kind of crossroads at which you could expect to meet the poor man of Nazareth.

My Ford Maverick brakes to a stop in front of St. Theresa's. The church is a white frame job, four windows to a side, absolute seating capacity of 40. The only aisle is so narrow that coffins won't fit. (All Luther Catholics,

upon exiting from the here and now, have their lives and deaths celebrated in a Mass of Christian Burial at Jones City some eight miles away.)

As I unlock the door and enter, the familiar musty odor is not so offensive as reassuring. I light the gas stove to knock the chill out of the air.

The church has no sacristy. A cabinet in the sanctuary serves the purpose. I open it, remove the Mass utensils and place them on the altar. I flip ribbons to set the sacramentary and the lectionary for their paschal turns.

Next I don the limp alb which has been hanging on a clothes hanger hooked to the top edge of the wooden housing of the Blessed Virgin Mary's statue.

Wearing a white stole I duck into the confessional, a homemade contraption of screen and curtains nestled in a corner of the sanctuary. Two sinners present themselves for shriving. The business of mercy is conducted truly pianissimo — a few of the early arrivers being all of 6 feet away.

As I finish vesting, I note that the whole gang is here and a tad shinier than usual. Tiny Holly Loman is draped over the kneeler in the first row; Stanley Kubiak's burnished farmer's face fronted by his out-of-kilter reading glasses juts up from the second row; and so on through the ranks of these homey saints, all in the exact spots they always occupy.

We sing "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation." No organ accompaniment, not much vocal talent, and always the same hymn at the beginning — ordinary time, Advent, Lent and Easter — but a prayerful try nonetheless.

"I take it you know what has been reported all over Judea about Jesus of Nazareth," Simon Peter says to us. The church in

Luther takes comfort in "When Christ our life appears, then you shall appear with him in glory." Finally we sprint to the tomb with John and Peter, and we too, believe.

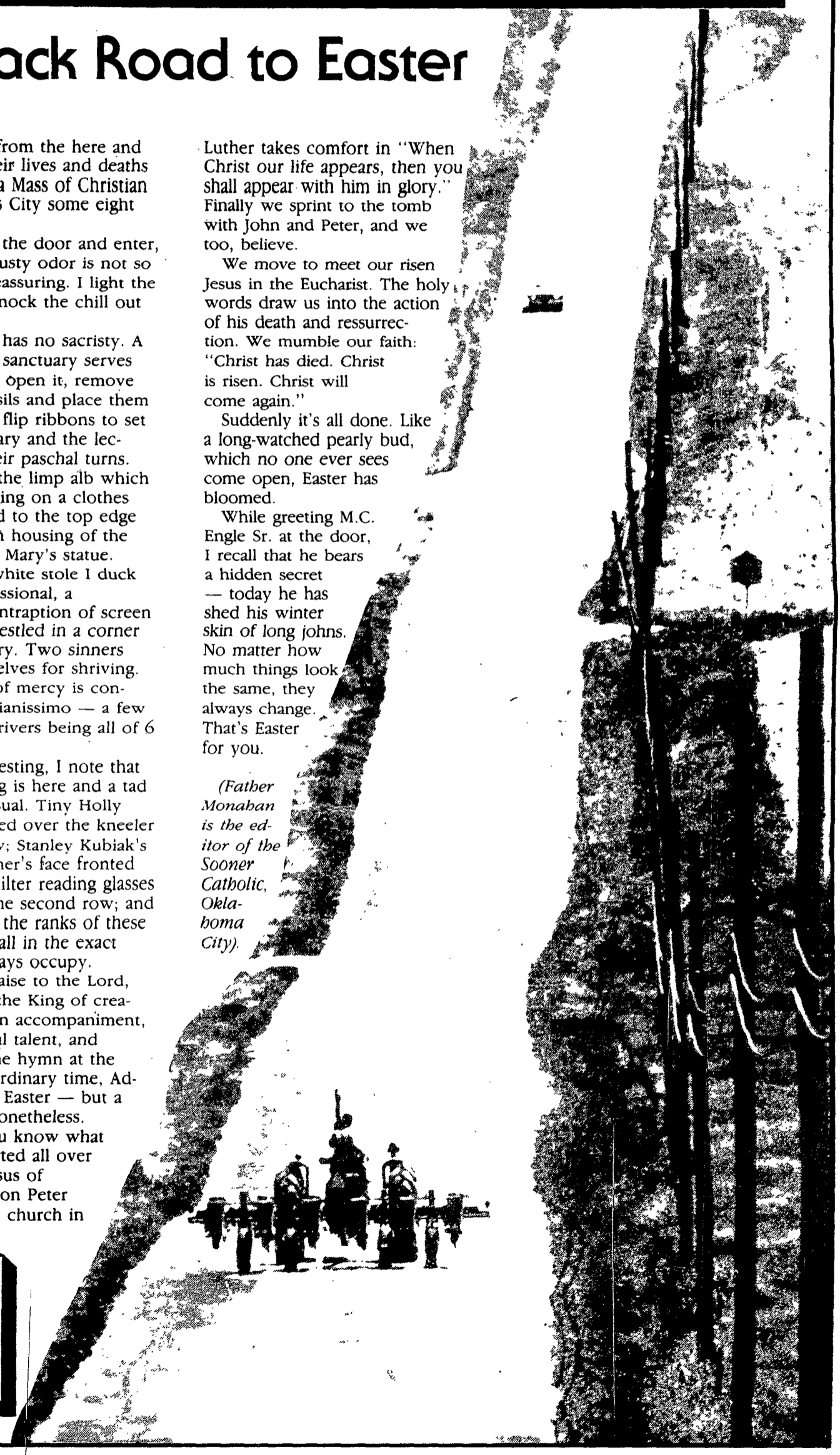
We move to meet our risen Jesus in the Eucharist. The holy words draw us into the action of his death and resurrection. We mumble our faith: "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again."

Suddenly it's all done. Like a long-watched pearly bud, which no one ever sees come open, Easter has bloomed.

While greeting M.C. Engle Sr. at the door, I recall that he bears a hidden secret — today he has shed his winter skin of long Johns. No matter how much things look the same, they always change. That's Easter for you.

(Father Monahan is the editor of the *Sooner Catholic*, Oklahoma City.)

On both sides of a winding Oklahoma backroad, a chorus of redbuds rise up to greet another Easter dawn. And at the church, a tad shinier than usual, the whole gang waits to meet the risen Lord.



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