

Conquering the worst that can happen

By Father David K. O'Rourke, OP
NC News Service

Life in the world of Jesus had a constant companion — death.

It is hard for people today, with a long life expectancy, excellent medical care and a basic belief that hostile forces can be subdued, to grasp what it was like to live in that ancient world. In that time, when enemies conquered, they slaughtered; when police arrested, they executed.

In the Holy Land death was daily, public and visible.

The discussion in the Gospels of Christ's crucifixion would have raised images as concrete as a Lebanese family's discussion of the effects of war today.

It is no wonder then that the Gospels make such a thing of the resurrection. Their description of the empty tomb was a way of saying that the worst that can happen in this life has been overcome.

To hammer in that message of liberation from the worst that life can offer, the early Christian writers added another image. They spoke of slavery, equating it with death.

But, they added, in the resurrection of Christ humanity was set free from the slavery of death.

In those days, unemployment, crop failure and business losses could mean indebtedness. Indebtedness, in turn, could mean being sold into slavery. As a

result, the image of death as a kind of slavery was strong.

Today the notion of resurrection may have lost some of its impact, since the reality of death has been softened in some nations.

I think we can be forgiven for seeking some comfort at the times when comfort is needed most. But there is a difference between denying death's reality (which we probably do not do); and softening death to the point where we end up in a state of limbo about it. Actually, Christian faith in the resurrection from the dead calls for a recognition of the sad fact of death for what it is.

On a number of occasions I have been at the hospital with families when the machines sustaining life in a comatose family member were turned off.

Sometimes families sustain themselves in these difficult moments with the thought that the person is already gone before the machines are turned off. I think of Jeff, who had been a vital man. I could understand the comment of the people around his hospital bed: "That's not Jeff. Jeff is already gone."

I spent a good part of the night by Jeff's bedside. As I sat there I thought of the comments about Jeff being gone. I could understand what the people meant, all right. But it was equally clear to me that Jeff was still alive.

Jeff was in a coma, kept alive by machines. He was very near death. But he was still alive.

His vital spirit was trapped in a body drastically diminished by his injuries. But the hand of death had not yet touched him.

Sometimes when someone dies, it may look to outsiders as though the family members are trying to soften death's blow. Probably the family members are only trying to cope with death's sting.

Christians believe that the passage to eternal life is as real as it is sorrowful: It is the passage of dying.

And, as was true in the days of Jesus, the impact of death — its reality — drives home the true significance of the resurrection.

The worst that can happen in this life has been overcome.

(Father O'Rourke is on the staff of the Family Life Office in the Diocese of Oakland, Calif.)



(Feist is associate editor of Faith Today.)

FOOD...

...for thought

Roots.

Easter has a lot to do with the roots Christians thrive on.

In recent years, people in society at large have gone looking for their roots. "Where do we come from?" people ask. "Who were our ancestors? What stirred them?" "How are we different from our parents? How are we like them?"

And people ask: "Will we know ourselves better when we better understand our roots?"

Some would say that the current preoccupation with roots is spawned, at least in part, by a society in which people feel rootless. But whatever causes people to investigate their roots, it seems there is a sense that without roots something is missing — something that people value.

Often it is said that Easter is the first Christian feast, the primary one. The remainder of the church's year is built up from Easter. And without Easter, the rest of the structure wouldn't make much sense.

Every Sunday is a little Easter, was the way Father Johannes Jungmann put it. He was a well-known writer on the history of the church's worship.

Father Jungmann's understanding makes Easter the key to understanding what the church does on every other Sunday of the year.

What this means is that Easter is basic. It anchors things for Christians the way roots anchor a tree.

But it needs to be remembered that the good roots of a tree are alive. Life courses through them and outward from them. They actively nourish the tree.

In that sense, to think of Easter in terms of the roots it gives Christians is to see Easter as more than a reference point, more than a point to look back to, more than a foundation stone in the common understanding of the term. Easter is life-giving.

Easter stirs Christians now: it makes an impact today. It is a source of vitality, the way roots can be.

That is why people who study and teach about the church's liturgy have made so much of Easter in recent years. They find it basic, a source of refreshment.

They find Christian roots there. What difference do roots make? Why do people care about their roots?

...for discussion

1. What does it mean to say that Christianity finds roots in Easter? Why should people care about their roots?

2. Have you ever made a big move or another big change in life similar to the one recounted by Joe Michael Feist in his article? What did this change mean to you? How did it change you?

3. Father David O'Rourke likens the resurrection to freedom from slavery. What does he mean by this? What might it mean in the lives of people today?

4. Monica Clark thinks the power of the resurrection is manifested when people forgive each other. Forgiveness brings new life, she suggests. Have you ever felt that forgiveness could bring about a big change — a big transformation — in situations that matter to you?

5. What is your favorite Easter memory?

6. How does your Easter celebration change when a loved family member can't be present?

SECOND HELPINGS

"Leading Our Children to God," by William Brinkmann and William Ditewig. Amy was suffering from unexplained headaches and the possibility of allergies came up, leading the young girl to ask one morning: "Did Jesus have allergies?" This led parent and child into a discussion of whether Jesus was really a man, even to the extent of being "completely vulnerable to pain and illness," the authors write in this little book. Parents and religious education teachers, the authors offer suggestions for teaching faith at home. They observe that "Our relationship with God must be a living and growing one; otherwise, like any neglected relationship it will wither and die." The authors draw from the Bible, the documents of Vatican Council II, the National Catechetical Directory for Catholics of the United States and their own family life. (Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, Ind. 46556. 1984. \$4.95.)