

EASTER (Years A, B, C)

I. Introduction

Some of you may remember the classic movie *Bridge Over the River Kwai*, which was based on the true story of several hundred British soldiers in the southeast Asian country of Burma who were captured by the Japanese early in World War II. The Japanese wanted to build a railroad through the jungle in order to supply their troops, and they forced their prisoners to do the work. One of the major obstacles was the Kwai River, over which a large bridge had to be constructed under primitive conditions. There was no modern equipment; the temperature sometimes reached 120 degrees; hunger, disease, and exhaustion were widespread, and the Japanese guards were unsympathetic, cruel, and even vicious or brutal. The prisoners' worst enemy wasn't the Japanese, however, but themselves. Fear of the Japanese made the British prisoners paranoid and suspicious of each other, and they reverted back to the law of the jungle. They stole from each other, distrusted each other, and informed on one another. The guards laughed and mocked them when they saw how these once-proud soldiers were destroying themselves.

Then all this began to change. Two prisoners decided something had to be done to improve morale—so they organized all the others into Bible study groups after their simple meal each evening. By studying the Gospel, these British prisoners gradually discovered Jesus—not as a long-dead historical figure or as a far-removed Lord observing them from Heaven, but as a real Person living in their midst. They also realized Jesus knew everything they were suffering, for He had often been hungry and exhausted; He too had been betrayed and whipped by His enemies. Jesus came alive to them, and all that He stood for began to make sense. This changed everything. The prisoners stopped informing on each other, and instead began helping and supporting one another. Each one prayed not only for himself, but for one another; and found a new inner power and peace. The camp slowly went through a transformation that amazed not only the Japanese, but also the prisoners themselves; their friendship with Jesus brought them from the brink of death and self-destruction back to life (Mark Link, S.J., *Illustrated Sunday Homilies*, Series I, Year C, p. 31). Some British soldiers in a Japanese prison camp seventy-five years ago discovered an important truth: the new life Jesus offers doesn't have to wait until we enter Heaven—it can begin here and now.

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II. Development -- **Easter Vigil only:**

Easter is a celebration not only of what Jesus did, but also of what He offers: the forgiveness of our sins, a deep meaning and purpose in life, and above all, eternal life and everlasting happiness in the Kingdom of God. When the women and the disciples discovered the empty tomb, of course, they didn't realize all this at first; they were overwhelmed with amazement and joy, and only gradually did they understand the implications of what had happened. Because their hearts were open, however, God's grace was able to work within them and transform them into saints.

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II. Development -- **Easter Sunday only:**

Easter is a celebration not only of what Jesus did, but also of what He offers. In the 1st Reading from the Acts of the Apostles, St. Peter gives a summary of Our Lord's life and ministry, describing His preaching, good deeds, and death and resurrection. The key line in Peter's testimony, however, comes at the very end: "Everyone who believes in Him will receive forgiveness of sins through His Name." If we do not believe in Jesus as Lord, He's at best an interesting and inspiring historical figure—but if we *do* believe, He's the One Who offers us freedom, peace, and eternal life. Reaching this point is usually a gradual process; as the Gospel shows, Mary Magdalene and Simon Peter didn't at first understand the meaning of the empty tomb. Only when they encountered the Risen Lord did they truly understand—and from then on, nothing was ever again the same.

III. Conclusion

This must also be true for us; we are not meant merely to observe Easter, but to *live* it. We have to open our hearts and allow Christ to transform our lives; if we let Jesus be reborn in us, we'll slowly come to experience a bit of Heaven on earth. If, instead of criticizing or judging others, we try to be sympathetic and understanding, we'll find it easier to relate to the people around us. If we resist the temptation to be selfish or stingy, and are instead generous with our time, energy, and material blessings, we'll discover that God is infinitely more generous with us—and we end up having far more blessings than we ever expected. If, instead of following our natural tendency to want things our own way, we take the radical step of placing Christ at the center of our lives, we'll find that our priorities sort themselves out and that everything somehow falls into place far better than we ourselves could ever have arranged.

Jesus offers us a peace and happiness infinitely greater than anything this world can give—and we don't have to wait until Heaven for these gifts to begin taking effect. This will not happen, however, if we merely come to church once or twice a year, or if we come to Mass every week but merely go through the motions. This will not happen if we're always more inclined to judge and criticize others than to love and accept them. This will not happen if we have higher priorities than our relationship with Jesus, or if we're unwilling to open our hearts to His Divine Will. Jesus wants to share His Easter victory by transforming our lives. He was able to do this in a harsh Japanese prison camp in Southeast Asia many years ago; He's also able to do this for us here and now. It's up to us to give Him this chance.