

“They Shall Sing for Joy”
**A Sermon for the Liturgy of the Resurrection
and Thanksgiving for the Life of John Skaritka**
Saturday, March 6th, 2010 at Sts. Peter and Paul Lutheran Church, Riverside, Illinois
(Hebrews 12:1-3; Luke 24:1-5; Isaiah 40:31; John 16:21, 22; Isaiah 35:5-10)

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”

Ann, I pray for you and your family today, that “the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

“But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, [the women] came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, ‘Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen’”.

“But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, John and Ann came to the tomb . . .”

John and Ann always came at early dawn on the first day of the week, rarely missing a Sunday, whether they were traveling all the way from Westmont or Niles, whether it was during the heat of summer or in the cold of winter. It didn’t matter that they may not have been feeling well; or that they may have had a restless night; or that the maroon Ford wasn’t running so great; John and Ann were always here seeking the hope of their risen Lord, ardently singing and praying their prayers in the language of their forebears. Ann, I’ve surely missed you and John here these past few years; there’s been an empty place there in that pew where you used to sit and here in my heart where you continue to abide. There has been a longing for your bright smile and John’s firm handshake at the door. For it is here in the church, the Lord’s very body, that we, together with John, are granted the gift of faith in our crucified and risen Lord Jesus; where we are filled with joy in the company of the saints who have gone before us; where are nurtured by the love of the Lord’s family; and where we have our hope restored through God’s Word and Holy Sacraments. I can’t be certain, but I doubt if John was ever so at peace as when he came to church with Ann, “early on the first day of the week,” where he found hope for his broken body and bruised spirit in the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

“. . . But those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,” says the prophet Isaiah, “they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” Our brother, John Skaritka, was a man whose strength to “run and not be weary” and to “walk and not faint” was the strength of someone who waited for the LORD. And Lord knows how John waited and waited and waited for the LORD, long since he was a young boy playing ball with his boyhood friends and brothers on a vacant lot in the old Chicago neighborhood.

Today, we stand for a moment to gaze with thankful eyes upon a baptized brother, a beloved companion with us in our pilgrimage on earth, whose course in this race of faith has come to a quiet finish. In the words of the Second Letter to Timothy, John “has fought the good fight, he has finished the race, and he has kept the faith.” Through it all, John has kept the faith. I could see it in the beaming smile of his face when we would greet each other for a visit. I could feel it from his heart when tears would stream down his face as we prayed the *Otcenas* and shared the Lord’s Supper. John may have lost his ability to speak his voice some nineteen years ago, but he never lost his ability to speak his heart. In fact, I think his heart compensated for his voice.

John has “run with perseverance the race that was set before him,” as Hebrews says so vividly, “looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross . . .” Everybody here knows that, with his Lord Jesus, John endured the cross. And everybody here knows that John was not a man whom the world would look upon as powerful. He was not a big man who could throw his weight around. He was not a loud man like so many who insist upon their way. He wasn’t interested in calling attention to himself, although there was plenty of attention for reasons he could not help. John lived a quiet, simple life of service, much of it devoted to his father and mother. To be honest, John was not a person with, what some would call, “lady luck” on his side.

No, John had far better than “lady luck” at his side. He had his Lord Jesus at his side; and he had his beloved Ann in his corner for the past thirty years. Who better to have at your side than the Lord Jesus, and in your corner than Ann Skaritka? I have seen you care for John day and night, Ann, with such deep compassion, mercy and love,

assisting and serving John in so many, countless, selfless ways—always there by his side to help him along; always there in the night season to offer him peace in his distress; always there with a gentle pat on the back when food went down the wrong way; always there with a soft towel to gently wipe his face. And always, always with unfailing mercy and great human dignity. Your service, Ann, was from the heart of Jesus. You, too, have “fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith.” You have “run with perseverance the race that was set before you.”

“Well done, good and faithful servant.”

The eyes of faith have seen in this man and woman’s life what the Apostle Paul describes in his Corinthian correspondence as “power made perfect in weakness,” the power of Christ made perfect within the body of human suffering. So, “Blessed are the poor in spirit . . .,” Jesus teaches in his Sermon on the Mount, “Blessed are those who mourn . . . Blessed are the meek . . . Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness . . . Blessed are the merciful . . . Blessed are the pure in heart . . . Blessed are the peacemakers . . . Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake . . .” And blessed is John.

John was a fine and decent, devout and gentle, loving and good man. I believe he learned his lessons well from his parents and brothers. I’m told that John loved baseball and fishing. I saw on his walls how he loved John Wayne and the Cubs. John was, to say the least, a gentleman. And even though the good Lord and life had not given John all that he may have wished for (Isn’t it that way for most of us?), he tried his very best to be a good sport.

One of my favorite literary passages in times like these occurs toward the end of J. R. R. Tolkien’s imposing trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*. As King Aragorn is preparing to die, he utters his final words to Arwen, his elven queen—words that contain a hint of resurrection: “In sorrow we must go, but not in despair. Behold! We are not bound forever to the circles of the world, and beyond them is more than memory.”

“In sorrow we must go, but not in despair . . . Behold! We are not bound forever to the circles of the world, and beyond them is more than memory . . .”

“You now, therefore, have sorrow,” Jesus said to his grieving friends, as he says to you this day, “But I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.”

“In sorrow we must go, but not in despair . . .”

Jesus goes on to say that death is like birth. Every birth involves suffering, but eventually the pain gives way to the joy of a child being born and the sorrow is past. The promise Jesus gives his disciples is that we will not be separated from him who loves us: “On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and me in you.”

“Where can I go from your spirit?” asks the psalmist, “Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in the place of the dead, you are there. . . .”

“In sorrow we must go, but not in despair . . .”

“You now, therefore, have sorrow, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.”

Finally, I offer you these words from the prophet Isaiah, words especially for our brother John: “Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, ‘Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God . . .’ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, *and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy*. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert . . . And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

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