Easter Saved in Hope Part III

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Alleluia! The Lord has risen! That is the Church’s proclamation today. After everything we have experienced this past week, Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem, his last supper and subsequent betrayal, and his passion and death on the cross, the Church now stands before Jesus’ empty tomb. We have discovered that our human nature does not come from nothingness and then return to nothingness. If we do not have God in our lives, this is all we could deduce about our lives; that we come from nothingness and return to nothingness. Because of the resurrection, we discover that our lives in fact can have a future through Jesus Christ. We do not know all the details of where our lives are going. However, we know our lives do not end in emptiness. And this hope in the future is medicine for the soul. It has an immediate effect on how we live our lives today. Spe salvi facti sumus, in hope we are saved.

During the Triduum, I have been giving reflections inspired by Pope Benedict’s encyclical Saved in Hope. And as we renew our baptismal promises today Pope Benedict has something very interesting to say. He writes in reference to an older form of infant baptism when a priest would ask the parents, “what do you ask of God’s Church for your child?” The answer would be “Faith”. The priest would continue, “What does faith offer you?” And the response from the parents would be “eternal life”. Pope Benedict continues, “Today, as in the past, this is what being baptized, becoming Christians, is all about: it is not just an act of socialization with the community, not simply a welcome into the Church. The parents expect more for the one to be baptized: they expect that faith, which includes the corporeal nature of the Church and her sacraments, will give life to their child- eternal life. Faith is the substance of hope. But then the question arises: do we really want this- to live eternally?” What a provocative question, do we really want to live eternally?

It is a provocative question because when we are young and we have our whole lives ahead of us, the last thing on our minds can be our mortality and eternal vocation. There is too much competing for our attention. The school or work assignment due next week or latest gizmo, news item or family drama, can simply attract our attention more than a consideration of what we might be doing in heaven a hundred years from now. Heaven can wait, as the saying goes, which is of course comes from a misunderstanding of what we mean by heaven. On the other hand, as we grow older, and our aches and pains accumulate, with loved one’s passing away before us, and relationships becoming more distant, the prospect of this kind of life going on for eternity seems unbearable. Eternal life in that sense does not seem very attractive at all. At the rite of welcome not too long ago, we asked our catechumens these very same questions, what do you ask of God’s Church? Their answer was “Faith”. What does “Faith” offer you? And their answer was “Eternal life”. We now stand before the empty tomb of Jesus. The Church proclaims at this liturgy Jesus’ resurrection and our hope in eternal life. The question now before us is “Do we want this-to live eternally?”
To help us answer this question, Pope Benedict suggests we need to better understand what the Church means by eternal life. What the object of our hope is and what the experience of eternal life is and what it isn’t. To begin with, eternal life properly understood is not an endless series of days that turn into years and then centuries where we just sit around and grow cobwebs and get bored. As mortals, we live in space and time. Eternal life in God is a place by definition not governed by space and time. Eternal life in God is an eternal now. And in our present state, we can only grasp what this is like through metaphor. Pope Benedict describes eternal life in God in this way, that it is like “plunging into the ocean of infinite love, a moment in which time – the before and after – no longer exists. We can only attempt to grasp the idea that such a moment is life in the full sense, a plunging ever anew into the vastness of being, in which we are simply overwhelmed with joy. This is how Jesus expresses it in Saint John’s Gospel: ‘I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you’ (16:22). We must think along these lines if we want to understand the object of Christian hope, to understand what it is our faith, our being with Christ, leads us to expect.”

And what does this future hope offer us today? We behold the resurrection of our Lord and recognize that our human nature does not come from nothingness and then return to nothingness. Our lives do not end in emptiness but rather with an ocean of infinite love. This future hope has an immediate effect on how we live our lives today. As we grow closer to Jesus in this life we begin to feel that ocean of infinite love more and more. Heaven is not some far off distant place in the cosmos. For Christians, Heaven is a place inside of us right now and all around us by the measure we love God and our neighbor. No matter what it is we are going through right now, in the resurrection of Jesus, our Father in heaven has stretched out his hand to us and life has changed forever by the power of the Holy Spirit. On Easter Sunday, the Church proclaims from the rooftops, Spe salvi facti sumus, in hope we are saved!