

Easter Sunday, April 23, 2000

By Fr. Charles Bowes

Acts 10:34a, 37-43

Colossians 5:6b-8

John 20:1-9

It is safe to live and love life to the death.

In 1982, there was the tragic winter air crash in Washington, D.C. The plane plunged into the Potomac River and in the frantic effort at rescue, there was a story of heroism, of life in the midst of death, that many heard and some witnessed.

There was more than one story, really, but in the most striking incident, six people clung to the tail wreckage in the river, minutes away from death by cold and drowning. Suddenly, a helicopter appeared, hovering over them, lowering a life ring. It was just a rubber ring; something to slip one's arm inside, to be dragged across the ice to safety. The ring came first to a man, who incredibly, passed it on. When the pilot flew back, he did it again; he helped others to grab the ring and gave up his own turn. He seemed stronger; he could help them. But the pilot, telling of the incident on television, said softly, "When all five were onshore we returned for this man but he was not there."

The next day the President took occasion to single out someone whose concern for others had delivered him to death. In a very real sense, this act of goodness had also delivered him to life.

And he was not alone. A fireman plunged into the

water. So did a government worker to rescue the dying. We saw them with our own eyes, on the screen - snatch people from the abyss.

This is a suggestion, a faint analogy, of how the redemptive love of Jesus Christ has worked for us and rescued us. He saved us from the fear of dying by dying himself.

But by dying, he destroyed death for others as well as for himself. When we pass through that portal, it opens not to the abyss but to the fullness of all that we have known of goodness and of life. When we heard or witnessed those tales of heroism we were inspired. We live better because a fellow human being, one of us, was good enough to do this thing for five strangers. The message of Easter is that the Son of Man has done this and more for humanity. There are no strangers for Jesus; he saved us because we are his sisters and brothers. He cannot abandon us to death. On Easter morning, the seekers did not find Jesus in the tomb. Nor is the tomb the final resting place of those we have loved, nor of those loving, living and hopeful persons who are ourselves. It is safe to live life so deeply that we can appear to die. Our holy communion and this gathering in which we become the Body of Christ nourishes us for that faith and that energy to live life to the full.

A monk tells the story of being summoned to the deathbed of a cloistered nun. Arriving at her cell, he found her standing on her narrow bed, arms spread wide, palms pressed against the doorsills prohibitively. Shrieking, she proclaimed, "I'm not leaving! I love this place!" We, too, have come to love this place we call our lives, and are loathe to leave it, no matter the duration and circumstances of our days.

But it's Easter and we know, we believe, it is safe to live and love life to the death.