

### GARBAGE AND FLOWERS

We have a special guest today, who will offer the beginning of my Easter message:

**(A clown enters from rear carrying a trash can, labeled *LIFE*. Previously, junk has been spread around the chancel area: a burst balloon, a crown of thorns, a newspaper with terrible headlines, signs that contain words like: war, violence, injustice, cancer, AIDS, abuse of the environment, greenhouse gases, etc. The clown begins, one-by-one, picking up trash items, holding them up for congregation to see, and then dropping them into the trash can. THEN the clown takes off a grubby old coat – revealing a white costume with multicolored hearts on it -- puts the old coat into the trash can and closes the cover. THEN, taking an Easter Lily from the Altar, the clown puts it on top of the garbage can with a big smile. The can, with the lily on top is placed in front of the communion table....)**

WOW! I can't think of a better WAY to express the meaning and message of Easter than our CLOWN just did! WHAT a picture: an EASTER LILY atop a pile of trash and garbage, which of course, SYMBOLIZES all the TRASH and GARBAGE that seems to be ABOUNDING in our LIVES and WORLD these days. And what a BEAUTIFUL way to express the eternal MESSAGE of Easter!

FIRST, LET'S talk about the GARBAGE. I don't know about YOU, but in MY 57 years upon this earth, I've never SEEN the world in such a state as it is NOW. God's BEAUTIFUL and precious GIFT to us is just HEAPING with garbage: WAR and the CONSEQUENCES of it; VIOLENCE everywhere, INCLUDING just about everything we see on our TV and movie screens; FEAR, which is constantly being FUELED by the MEDIA, as WELL as POLITICIANS; deep FRUSTRATION and prejudice, ANGER and HATRED; severe POVERTY and injustice; an ENVIRONMENT that is CHOKING and slowly DYING; a TERRIBLE economy; an OIL crisis. And I could go ON and ON! This WORLD is becoming a veritable TRASH-HEAP!

Furthermore, I suspect that we ALL could fill our OWN trash cans with all the GARBAGE in our OWN lives. Disappointments by the dozen would go into it! So would FAILURES and GUILT; SICKNESS and STRESS; SHAME, GRIEF and HURT. And I'll bet even CHILDREN can think of LOTS of YUCKY things to put in the trash can too -- like family FIGHTS and bullies, divorce and broken toys, and a WHOLE lot more. YES, there's PLENTY of garbage around us these days, PLENTY of trash!

Well, interestingly enough, THAT'S how the disciples of JESUS felt following His DEATH on the cross. Take the two disciples on the road to Emmaus in our Scripture Lesson. I'm SURE they must have felt as if a GARBAGE STRIKE were going on, and the stuff was piled HIGH all over Jerusalem. As a matter of fact, just 2 DAYS earlier, they'd seen the WORST garbage they'd EVER seen. It happened at the *Place of the Skull*, where their teacher and friend, Jesus of Nazareth, was hung on a cross and MURDERED. Now, they'd GONE to Jerusalem, or SO they THOUGHT, in order to CELEBRATE! It was the PASSOVER, a time of JOY, as they remembered their miraculous *EXODUS* out of SLAVERY in Egypt. And just a week before this, as they ARRIVED in Jerusalem, the crowds had WELCOMED Jesus to the capital city as they would welcome a new KING into their midst, waving PALM, which were their FLAGS, and shouting HOSANNA, save us! And the disciples had been so EXCITED! But then, TENSION and controversy came! Jesus was ARRESTED and given a JOKE of a "kangaroo court" TRIAL. And THEN, they EXECUTED Him like a common criminal, when His ONLY crime had been preaching LOVE. Talk about GARBAGE! THESE guys had SEEN it, and FELT it – big time!

And SO, after hanging around Jerusalem for a couple days, the two of them take off to Emmaus, 7 miles AWAY from the STENCH of Jerusalem's garbage. Maybe the AIR will be

BETTER there. Maybe their TEARS will stop FLOWING on the way. Maybe they just need to get AWAY for awhile. ON the way, a STRANGER approaches them. WE know Him as Jesus, but WHY would THEY know Him? Jesus was the LAST person THEY expected to see. Oh, they'd heard RUMORS that He was ALIVE again, but it was JUST the imaginations of some hysterical WOMEN, wasn't it? The stranger TALKS and LISTENS, then TALKS some more. But they get NOT a CLUE about the FLOWER in the midst of their GARBAGE heap, UNTIL they invite the stranger to STAY for SUPPER and they break bread together. And SOMETHING in that familiar act of breaking bread PIERCES their BLINDNESS. Suddenly they REALIZE that the GARBAGE in their lives is not the END of the story. It's just a MESSY part of their PRESENT reality. But in the MIDST of it, there's ANOTHER reality, and it smells UP the place just as SWEETLY as these FLOWERS that we have among us TODAY. And the disciples can't WAIT to take the NEWS back to Jerusalem, BACK to their FRIENDS.

And do you know WHAT? The SAME thing has been happening EVER since. And while it often takes a lot of LOOKING, and smelling, before we find any FLOWERS amidst the garbage, FLOWERS are ALWAYS present. We may LIVE in a *Good Friday World*, (and of course, Good Friday is *Garbage Collection Day*, isn't it?), but OUR faith is an EASTER faith. And for 2000 years, our EASTER faith has been ENLIVENING and EMPOWERING Christian people in EVERY time and place. During the first 300 years of the church's history, thousands of people had the courage to PROFESS their faith in Jesus Christ, even though it meant being persecuted, and often slaughtered, at the hands of the Roman Empire. Did you know that, LATER on, Christians took the very SPOT where Emperor Nero had burned THOUSANDS of Christians at the stake in order to light his GARDEN parties, and those Christians planted THERE, in that SPOT of TERROR, the very beautiful VATICAN GARDENS. And it became part of the HOME of their LEADER, the Pope! And SO, what was once a place of HORROR is NOW a magnificent GARDEN, FILLED with LIFE and flowers and beauty of ALL kinds!

OR, how about *Coventry Cathedral* in England? During *World War II*, the bombs rained down THICK and HARD. And during one of those bombing raids, a bomb struck *Coventry Cathedral*! A FIRE started and the church was totally GUTTED. Only 3 stone walls remained. Well, the next day during their clean-up operation, some workmen found 2 huge BEAMS, which were only SLIGHTLY charred. SO, they TIED the 2 beams together and made a HUGE cross, and LEANED it against one of the 3 surviving walls. SOMEONE then put a SIGN on the cross which read, *FATHER, FORGIVE....* Sometime later, ANOTHER sign was placed BESIDE the Cathedral. It read, *To the Glory of GOD, this Cathedral BURNED*. Well, I'm TOLD that, ever SINCE then, *Coventry Cathedral* has been a wonderful place of SPIRITUALITY and culture, with concerts and dramatic performances and large ecumenical services OFTEN performed on its STEPS. You see: AMID all that GARBAGE, a FLOWER bloomed!

Yes, EASTER is about ALL those flowers! EASTER is about ALL the SIGNS of HOPE and NEW LIFE that EMERGE in the midst our hopelessness and despair, our pain and trouble, our frustration and anxiety. And those FLOWERS are but GLIMPSES of the love of GOD, a LOVE that WE have TRIED our very best to KILL, or at least BURY under a huge STONE. But GOD'S love, DIVINE love, will not REMAIN dead and buried. GOD'S love is ALIVE and well, constantly pushing its beautiful HEAD up through ALL our garbage in a multitude of ways!

I'll never forget the year (and it MAY happen again THIS year) that a woman told me that, out in her yard, which was covered with SNOW, there was ONE lonely, purple FLOWER, a little CROCUS, sticking its head UP through the snow. And she said, *Gee, it's SO SAD!* And I said, *NO, that's NOT sad at all! It's WONDERFUL! What a GREAT statement it makes! AMIDST the garbage of all this SNOW and ICE, which we're SO SICK of, a flower BLOOMS!* And it's JUST like our *Easter FAITH* in this *Good Friday WORLD*. Even though the garbage is piled SO high AROUND us that we THINK we're about to SUFFOCATE, there is ALWAYS a FLOWER in the midst of it, IF we will just LOOK for it. Yes, God's redeeming LOVE is ALWAYS

present and ACTIVE, always transforming crucifixions EVERYWHERE into resurrections, into NEWNESS of LIFE, EVEN in the WORST of circumstances!

Now of course, we can HEAR the promise of EASTER and NOT respond to it. We can have our *Happy little Easter* with our family, and then go back to business as usual, UNMOVED and UNCHANGED in any WAY. **OR**, LIKE those 2 disciples, we can LET the new life of Easter BURN in our hearts, and make us go RUNNING off to tell our friends and loved ones! You see: the hallelujahs and the Easter songs, the sermon and even the CLOWN today, are all NICE, and even CUTE. BUT, they REQUIRE a RESPONSE! You see: LIKE those 2 disciples in Emmaus, we CANNOT just selfishly hold TIGHT to the message and truth of Easter, and KEEP it JUST for OURSELVES! No! We NEED to go running BACK to Jerusalem – we NEED to go RUNNING back to that place -- wherever it IS in our lives -- where the GARBAGE is piled HIGHEST (maybe in our troubled MARRIAGE, or maybe in our JOB where it's just so TOUGH to keep WORKING, day in and day out; or maybe in our next-door NEIGHBOR, who gives us SUCH trouble; or maybe in a political CAUSE that seems to NEED our ongoing perseverance) -- but we need to go BACK to WHEREVER the garbage is piled HIGHEST in our lives. And THEN, we NEED to take that FLOWER: we NEED to take that sweet, but powerful MESSAGE and TRUTH of Easter -- and we need to PLANT that flower right THERE, in the MIDDLE of that filthy PILE of trash, JUST like the CHURCH planted her POPE in the middle of the CHARRED remains of all those BURNED Christian MARTYRS. Yes, right THERE, in the MIDDLE of our broken and hurting lives, AND in the middle of our hate-filled and violent WORLD, THAT is where the FLOWERS of our Easter faith NEED to be PLANTED! And THERE, they will continually REMIND us, OVER and over again, that ALL that GARBAGE in our lives and world does NOT have the LAST word. No! Not even CLOSE, because the LAST word belongs to a loving, forgiving and merciful GOD. The LAST word belongs to an EMPTY tomb and a RISEN Lord. And that LAST WORD, my friends, is the WORD that's found in our next HYMN! SO, let's SING it with EVERYTHING in us! Amen.