The other day I was speaking with my mom and I asked her about going to Easter Mass early in the morning. She shared that she and my dad would get their nine children up at 3:00 in the morning, get dressed, and travel to the Slovene-Croatian Church of the Nativity in San Francisco for pre-dawn Mass. I remember Father Vodusek lighting the Easter Candle. There was always a large crowd.

What was it that motivated my parents to do this year after year?

Last week I was taking a walk in Atherton and lost in the music playing from my Airpods. All of a sudden, a group of youngsters sped by on their bikes. I wasn’t paying any attention until I heard, “Hey, there’s Father Tom!” Four of our recent Saint Pius School graduates circled back around and came up to talk - mostly complying with “social distancing.” Max, Andrew, Benjamin and Oliver were full of laughter and energy. In the midst of these very difficult days, it was great to just laugh and connect.

As they sped off to their destination in Menlo Park, for some inexplicable reason, I was overcome with sadness. Where are they going? Where is the path of life going to lead them?

In John’s account of the resurrection, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb early in the morning while it was still dark. What motivated her to return in the darkness to the tomb of her beloved friend?

Then, seeing that he was not there, she returned to tell Peter and John the news. It is interesting to note that John does not say that the disciples walked or casually journeyed to the tomb.

No, he says they ran, one outrunning the other. Once at the tomb, they “saw and believed” that what Jesus had been teaching them in preparation of his death had come to pass in his resurrection.

In one sense, it is conjecture to wonder what motivated Peter and John to run. Perhaps Peter gives a glimpse in his words recorded in the Acts of the Apostles: “You know what has happened all over Judea, beginning in Galilee…how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power. He went about doing good and healing all those oppressed.”

This very poignant and beautiful sentiment must have been what prompted Mary, Peter and John to go to the tomb. It was the memory of the many lives that had been touched and transformed by Jesus: the leper; the centurion’s servant; Peter’s mother-in-law; the paralytic; the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well; the man born blind; the raising of Lazarus; Mary Magdalene and the very disciples themselves.

There were memories, to be sure; but beneath the actions was a deep connection that these companions of Jesus felt. He was a good man who made it a point to reach out and heal those so often disconnected from others, cast along the margins and the periphery.

Perhaps knowing this man of such profound goodness motivated them to run.

It was knowing how important faith was to them that motivated my parents to rouse us from deep sleep so early in the morning.

It is the importance of friendship and camaraderie and the carefree innocence of youth that motivated our four young parishioners to charge along their way.
It is these very elements which cause us to gather together this glorious day to celebrate the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Like Mary Magdalene and the disciples, we have so many memories of how Jesus did so much good and healed.

Our own personal and collective experience of Jesus brings to life the words echoed by the prophet Isaiah: “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, to set free those imprisoned…”

The resurrection by its nature is an inter-active proposition between Jesus Christ and us. It is a historical fact, to be sure; however, the depths of its implications prepare us for the glory we will share through the gift of eternal life. Yet that journey begins with us—here and now—in proclaiming the Good News in our real, workaday experience.

The theologian N.T. Wright, in his book Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church, offers this challenge: “Easter has a very this-worldly, present-age meaning: Jesus is raised, so he is the Messiah, and therefore he is the world’s true Lord; Jesus is raised, so God’s new creation has begun - and we, his followers, have a job to do! Jesus is raised, so we must act as his heralds, announcing his lordship to the entire world, making his kingdom come the earth as in heaven!

In the midst of this current global health crisis, there are so many instances of people magnanimously serving one another and reaching out to make sure others are safe and healthy. The degree of heroism from so many people, from health care professionals to members of our Armed Forces to our own local Redwood City police and fire departments San Mateo County sheriffs, is truly amazing. Countless acts of kindness on the part of our parishioners are being done every day.

The other day I was on the phone with a very good friend of mine, Thomas Mazzucco, an attorney in San Francisco. He shared the story about one of his law partners, Tim Halloran, whose son is a doctor in Brooklyn. John is a graduate of Stuart Hall and Saint Ignatius College Prep. He has contracted the Coronavirus and his only desire is to get back to work to heal his patients. Thomas describes him as “man for others.”

This identity, this life of being men and women in the service of others, is formed as we, too, stand at the empty tomb and find that Jesus has risen from the dead. This is a call for spiritual renewal, to reorienting our lives towards glorifying God by our practice of our faith through prayer and service to others.

We are living in unprecedented times. None of us could have ever imagined our lives being so dramatically upended. What we had come to take for granted is, at the very least, on pause. More realistically, the truth is that because of our current situation, life is not going to be the same.

We will rebound, to be sure; but I hope and pray that we reexamine our purpose in life. I say this not out of pessimism but out of optimism and faith in the future God has in store for us. What gets us up in the morning? What motivates us to do what we do? This is a time to reclaim and recapture the purpose for which God created us, as expressed by Saint Ignatius of Loyola in the First Principle and Foundation: “Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul.”
We can do the things that engage us in the world, in the present, but we can nuance it a little bit more to include our relationship with Jesus. We need to make him front-and-center again so that we feel his presence in the good moments and the difficult ones too.

Today is a day for new beginnings. God’s faithfulness and fidelity to us has been realized in the passion, death and now the triumph of His Son’s resurrection. Now we sense and experience for ourselves that life conquers death and light shatters the darkness. In the words of Saint Paul, may we seek what is above. May we transcend all that limits us and makes us so anxious in this present state and think of the things of heaven. Yes, we have to engage in the reality of this finite space, but we can do it within the context of knowing we were ultimately made for heaven. These present anxieties will pass. Today is a day of amazing grace!

May we take to heart and live out the words Saint Paul spoke to the Colossians: “You are God’s chosen race, his saints: he loves you, and you should be clothed in sincere compassion, in kindness and humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with one another; forgive each other as soon as a quarrel begins. The Lord has forgiven you; now you must do the same. Over all these clothes, to keep them together and to complete them, put on love. And may the peace of Christ reign in your hearts because it is for this that you were called together as parts of one body. Always be thankful.”

May God grant you every grace and blessing this day and always! Alleluia and blessed Easter!