Chapel Homily: Scott E. Erickson
Friday in Easter Week, 25 April 2003

Text: Mache dich (St., Matthew Passion, movement 65)

Homily:

Sometimes I think that being a Christian is NOT worth it in the end. You have heard me speak about how hard it can be to have an Easter faith in a Good Friday world. But I think that it is difficult to have an Easter faith at all -- no matter what kind of world we live in.

Life with God is hard. Is it worth it? Even the new Archbishop of Canterbury has the guts to ask, "How do we go on believing in God when God's Son dies?" (Christian Century, 20 April 2003, p. 16)

What follows serves as a reflection for your heart, and for your mind, and for your soul. One finds these reflections in a variety of places: the text used by a German composer; a white man's first encounter with Africa; and the lyrics of a rock star. I ask that you sit back, listen, and reflect on your own experiences.

Bach's musical setting of today's reading is a stunning musical offering of sheer beauty -- and at the same time a scary description of what it means to know Jesus. There is no putting Jesus at arm's length in the music you heard as you entered Chapel today: "I want to bury Jesus myself," sings the baritone, so that Jesus can "have his sweet rest within me. World, depart, let Jesus enter." I typically find myself in an awkward position when I hear that: I want Jesus to ENTER my heart and to EXIT it at the same time. It would be easier if Easter had not happened. Then I could just stop believing in God because God's son dies. But the Easter message of resurrection means that now I have to deal with what for me, as a Christian, is the God of new life, of new beginnings, and of a new creation. Not a dead God. Not a God that I can keep up in heaven. Not a God that I can avoid. Not a God that will stay out of my business. Not a God that is easy to live with.

When I set foot onto African soil for the first time in March, I think that I did what the black author Thandeka seems to describe in her book, Learning to Be White. I never thought that I had to learn about being white, but I was wrong. In Ghana I was the "white person." John Thompson-Quartey was not my "black" colleague. Rather, I was the noticeable "white guy" traveling with him. No one seemed to see all the black people that I found myself with, but I was easily identified as what one person called "that white priest." Thandeka writes about what it means for white people to be in what she calls the "process of becoming white" and that this process is typically formed and shaped by experiences and feelings of "shame." (Learning to Be White, p. 1) I feel shame when I think about all the things that white people did in Africa in centuries past, and even more shameful when I think about all the things that white people are NOT doing to help Africa today. I wonder where God is in all this -- the God of Easter. Where is God in all this history, in all this shame, in all this turmoil of my "learning to be white"?

In recent years I have come to regard Paul Simon as one of my favorite theologians. When I have questions that I cannot answer -- like the ones when I listen to Bach or travel to
Ghana -- I consult "Graceland." Simon weaves a musical tale of traveling to see The King's palace in Memphis, Tennessee. "I'm going to Graceland / Graceland / In Memphis Tennessee / I'm going to Graceland." But, for me, these lyrics tell me more about life than simply saying something about a trip "Down the highway / Through the cradle of the civil war." It is a song full of broken people, broken relationships, broken ideals, broken families, broken hearts. It's like my broken heart when I think about all the times that I have desperately wanted Jesus to have something to do with my life, only to disappoint myself because I lack the will to do it. It's like my broken heart when I think about what we white folks should NOT have done in Africa in centuries past, and now what we should be doing. Simon sings, "There's a girl in New York City / Who calls herself the human trampoline / And sometimes when I'm falling, flying / Or tumbling in turmoil I say / Oh, so this is what she means."

When God comes TO LIFE in my life, even as I am tumbling in turmoil like I'm on a human trampoline, I can sing along with Paul Simon because I feel like I too am "bouncing into Graceland." We do not always know how to live like we should -- but we are bouncing into Graceland. We do not always know how to act like we should -- be we are bouncing into Graceland. We do not always know how to say what we should -- but we are bouncing into Graceland. I do not completely understand what I should be doing for my new friends in Ghana -- but I am bouncing along with them into Graceland. I make huge mistakes, say stupid things, act in inappropriate ways -- but that does not keep us separated from the God of Easter who LOVES us because God has prepared a Graceland for us -- even if our journey to that Graceland often feels like a human trampoline.

I think that's the point of living a life with the God of Easter. We are all on our way to Graceland. This means -- that every day -- we have new chances, new opportunities, new beginnings, new hopes, new dreams. EVEN "Poorboys and Pilgrims with families / And we are [all] going to Graceland."

Life with God, my friends, is hard. It often feels like "bouncing [along] into Graceland." But the central question is this: Do you have the will to give it a try?