In February of 2017, just a little more than a year ago, I led a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and Jordan. It was an experience beyond words. Along with thirty-five awesome others, we walked where Jesus walked and had many other fantastic adventures as well. One of our destinations was of course the River Jordan, the site of the Baptism of the Lord. It was an incredibly beautiful day. We first renewed our Baptismal promises, which we will also be doing in a short time at this Easter Vigil Mass -- after the Elect make these solemn promises for the first time before they take the plunge. Almost everyone either waded into the Jordan or touched the water. There is no need to bless that water since Christ made it holy forever when he stepped into it; and indeed, in a mystical and real way, he recreated all waters and the whole world as he entered this river.

As good as that day was, the highlight of our pilgrimage for me was the visit to the tomb of Jesus – the actual site of his Resurrection and the reason we are here tonight celebrating what in English we call Easter. This site is inside the Church of the Holy Sepulcher where it has been for almost 1700 years.

What is believed to be the tomb of Christ was discovered about 300 years after his death. Once the terrible Roman persecution of the Christians that lasted 250 years ended, a man named Constantine (ca. 288-337) became Emperor of Rome in 312 A.D. – and he also became a Christian and legalized Christianity. His mother, St. Helena (ca. 250-ca.330) later journeyed to Palestine in 326 with a group, among them some men we would today call archaeologists. She and the experts with her purportedly discovered the true cross of Christ as well as the sites of his crucifixion and burial. Constantine then ordered the building of a church known to western Christians as the Church of the Holy Sepulcher over these spots – and this structure was consecrated in 335 A.D.

There is good reason to believe that Helena was accurate in pinpointing where the crucifixion and resurrection happened. The local Christians would have kept alive the tradition of venerating these places and it would not have been hard to
identify the general area where they had to be located. Over history more archeological evidence has tended to confirm that Helena was right – especially about the tomb of the Lord. Just recently I heard a news report that experts had found even more evidence that St. Helena and her retinue did a good job. And the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is still there – having been destroyed by fire and by human and natural disasters several times over the centuries – but always rebuilt.

On a Monday of our pilgrimage, we set out very early in the morning to celebrate Mass over the tomb of Jesus. We had only a half hour because so many groups want to do the same. The slab of rock on which Jesus’ body was laid is today enclosed in a beautiful marble casing. On top of that they put a wooden altar – and it was here that we celebrated Mass. In this sacred place the Mass readings and prayers are always from the Mass of Easter Sunday. It was an exciting moment. For a priest to make the risen Christ present in the Eucharist on the very tomb from which he rose is a thrill that can hardly be described. For all of us pilgrims at that Mass it perhaps felt a little bit like the high Jesus himself experienced in his Resurrection.

We Christians are all called to make Christ present every day by the witness we give to him in following his example. In a sense we make him present on the altar of the world whenever we are willing to sacrifice our time and energy in service to our neighbor, especially the poor.

In the time of Jesus, the place where he was crucified and the place of his burial were outside the city walls of Jerusalem. It was only later that the walls were expanded and that is why the Church of the Holy Sepulcher now stands within the city itself. In the Letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament, we read that Jesus was crucified “outside the camp” (Hebrews 13: 13) that is, outside the city. What went on “outside the camp” was symbolic in the Jewish religion of activities that should not happen inside Jerusalem itself. On the Day of Atonement for sin, for example, the bodies of the animals sacrificed to make up for the sins of the people during the previous year were burned outside the camp – as required by Jewish law recorded in the Book of Leviticus (Lev 16: 27). By the way, this
celebration of Atonement is where we get the term “scapegoat” because goats were among the animals used in this ritual. Jesus who took our sins to the cross is the true and eternal atonement and so it is appropriate that he was executed “outside the camp.” The idea was that nothing unclean should ever be allowed in the holy city of Jerusalem and certainly not in the Temple. Crucifixion was considered unclean.

Throughout history, spiritual writers have encouraged Christians to “go outside the camp” to be with Jesus and to participate in the suffering of his sacrifice for us and to extend the spirit of his eternal sacrifice in our daily lives. In our time, Pope Francis has encouraged us to leave our comfortable lives and go often to the outskirts or margins of our existence to help those who have been forgotten and to whom we are sorely tempted to be indifferent. In effect, the pope invites us to go “outside the camp” of our personal Jerusalem to be with those whom society frequently treats as unclean or even as non-existent.

Outside the camp in our time, among other folks, are the hungry and the homeless, as well as young and often poor pregnant women struggling to make the right decision, opioid addicts and their families worried to death, the lonely and especially the lonely who are dying. Outside the camp of our lives also are lots of people without health care in the richest country in the world, working Moms and Dads with low wages who can never make ends meet, students who have survived school shootings and who want to change America’s gun culture – and way outside the camp right now are refugees from Syria and Central America and elsewhere awaiting a place to lay their heads. Outside the camp we will find sinners too, including sometimes ourselves, who hope for God’s mercy. Of course, we will always discover mercy outside the camp because Jesus who is Mercy itself is there until the end of time. And while we are there receiving mercy, we might be moved to help him in one of his disguises.

Sisters and brothers, the true celebration of Easter happens “outside the camp” where Jesus died and was buried. Here in our beautiful church, the liturgy of Easter assures us that Christ died and rose for each one of us and that his blood
has washed away our sins. And it is good beyond doubt for us to be here tonight – and to be here every Sunday because every Lord’s Day celebrates the Resurrection. But to be truly at the foot of his cross and to be present at the empty tomb, we need to journey to the outskirts. It is only there that through our sacrifices new life will come about in the suffering of the lonely and discarded. It is primarily when we are with our neighbor who needs us that we are authentically Temples of the Holy spirit and true representations of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher where Easter began.