One of the things that is so easy to do is to judge a book by it's cover. How easy this is to do when we see someone at one moment in time, or read something on social media, or hear something about them or learn something about them such as their background, their politics, or knew someone who knew them. But as I'll often say in the confessional with people who tell me there's someone they can't stand, be it someone they know or a politician or religious figure, if you took a few moments of our lives, or even of our week, you could put together a pretty ugly picture. But the beautiful story of Easter is that God, in His wisdom, sees past this. He sees the potential within, the good person that is waiting to emerge and can with the power of love. The challenge is to open our eyes to that need for change in our hearts, and to allow that good person to emerge through the power of God's love and mercy.

Jane Tyson Clement, the 20th century poet and author, once wrote a short story called "The White Lilly," telling the story of a man whom most people thought they had sized up. The story reads:

Once long ago, near a village far away, there lived an old peasant known as Ivan. He had a little hut, a small garden, a dog named Rubles, and a six-

year-old nephew, Peter, who was an orphan. Ivan was not a bad man, as he did not murder, did not steal, told no lies, and did not meddle in other people's business. But on the other hand he couldn't be called a good man either. He was cross and dirty. He seldom spoke, and then only grudgingly and unpleasantly. He paid no attention to his neighbors, never showed them kindness, and refused any small courtesy or friendliness they offered him. Eventually they paid no attention to him either and let him go his own way. As for Rubles the dog, he was afraid of his master and never went near him. He would follow him at a distance to the village and back, would bark at all strangers as watchdogs should do, and he would drive off the foxes that tried to molest the hens. So Ivan kept the dog and left scraps for him, but never stroked or praised him.

Peter was a silent little boy, since he was never spoken to except in anger. He had no friends, for the village children feared his uncle too much to come near him, and Peter was too shy to speak to anyone. So he ran wild in the woods and made up his own lonely games. He feared his uncle Ivan, who spoke to him so fiercely that Peter was quite cowed and frightened.

All this was bad enough, but added to it was filth and ugliness. The little cottage was brown and bleak, the windows (there were two quite nice ones) grimy and stained, the wooden rafters sooty, and all the walls and corners full of cobwebs. On the floor were the scraps and leavings of many meals, and the mud dragged in from many rainy months. The hearth was black, the pots and kettles dingy, the big bed for Ivan and the trundle bed for Peter tumbled and unmade, the table littered and smeared, and the chairs half-broken. It was all a sorry sight, and no better outdoors, for the doorsill was tumble-down, weeds grew everywhere, the vegetables came up as best they might, and not a flower was to be seen.

The living things themselves were even worse. Rubles was thin and dirty and full of burrs. Poor Peter wore rags, his hair grew long and was tangled with straw from his bed, and he was so filthy one could scarcely see the boy beneath. As for Ivan, he was huge. His black hair and beard were unkempt, and he looked quite terrifying. His clothes were as black with age and no washings as his hair. He was so unpleasant to look at that all he met turned their heads away, wrinkled their noses, and passed him as quickly as possible.

One bleak March day, when it seemed as if all had been waiting for spring for many weeks, Ivan had to go to the village to fetch some beans. As he trudged along the road, homeward bound again, in the distance he saw a man coming toward him. Ivan was ready as usual to pass him by without a glance, but when he drew nearer, out of the tail of his eye Ivan noticed he was a stranger, and in spite of himself Ivan looked full at him. Then he could not look away. The stranger was young, tall and spare, in rough peasant dress, with a shepherd's staff. On one arm he carried a sheaf of white lilies, like the day lilies that grew wild in the fields, only so fair and glowing that they dazzled the eye. Ivan stopped in his tracks, and with a smile the stranger stopped also. While Ivan stared, the stranger looked him over slowly, from his broken boots to his lined and dirty face. Then he spoke:

"Good day, friend."

When there was only silence, with Ivan staring, the stranger spoke again.

"What is it you see?"

Ivan lifted his eyes then to the man's face. The light there was like the lilies, and he looked at them again.

"Those flowers…I never saw any so fair."

"One of them is yours," said the stranger.

"Mine?" said Ivan.

The stranger took one of them and offered it to Ivan, who with astonishment and unbelief exclaimed, "What do you want for it? I am a poor man."

"I want nothing in return, only that you should keep the flower clean and pure."

Ivan wiped his dirty hands on his coat and reached for the lily. His fingers closed around the stem, and he stood in the road staring at it for a long while, not knowing what to do with the precious thing now that he had it.

When he looked up at last, the stranger had passed into the distance again. Carefully Ivan carried the lily home.

Once inside the door he stood doubtfully in the middle of the floor, looking all around at the filth and disorder and not knowing where to put the white shining lily. Peter had been sitting dejectedly by the dead fire, but now he stood up slowly, gazing at his uncle in amazement. At last he found his voice and said to him, “Where did you find it?”

And in a hushed tone Ivan answered, “A stranger gave it to me, for nothing, and told me only to keep it clean and pure…What am I to do with it?”

In an eager voice Peter answered, “We must find something to hold it! On that high shelf you put an empty wine bottle last Easter. That would do.”

“Then you must hold it while I fetch the bottle down. But your hands are too dirty! Draw water from the well and wash first!”

This Peter rushed to do, coming back at last with clean hands. Ivan carefully gave him the flower, but cried out when Peter put it to his face to smell it. “Wait! Your face is too dirty!” Ivan seized a rag and rushed outside

to the well, where he drew a bucket of water and washed the rag first, and then came in and awkwardly scrubbed Peter's face. When he was through he stepped back, unbelieving, as the boy with care smelled the white flower. He thought he had never seen that boy before. Then he remembered the bottle and clambered up to get it. But it was dirty, too, and clogged with cobwebs. So out to the well it went, and came in clean and shining, filled with clear water. He set the lily in it and placed it on the window sill. Then they both looked at it. Its glow lit the dim and dingy room, and as they looked at it a wonder rose in Ivan at all the filth around him. "This fair lily cannot live in such a place!" he said aloud. "I must clean it."

"Can I help?" asked Peter.

It was a hard task and took more than one day. Windows were washed, walls and floors swept and scrubbed, pots and kettles scoured, and chairs mended. The table was washed, the beds aired and beaten and put in order, and the hearth polished till the long-neglected tiles gleamed in the firelight and the pots and kettles winked back. The unaccustomed daylight flooded in the windows and the dark rafters shone in the shadows. All the while the lily glowed on the window sill. When they were done, they looked

about them in wonder and pleasure that the little house could be so fair. And then they saw each other.

“We don’t belong in a house like this!” said Ivan. “Next we scrub ourselves.”

By now he and the boy were friends, having worked so well together. So they scrubbed themselves, and Ivan went to the village to buy decent clothes for them both. He noticed Rubles following him at a distance. When he came home he thought to himself, “That dog is a sight, dirty and full of burrs. He doesn’t belong to this house. He must be cleaned.” But when he went to get him, the dog slunk away out of reach and feared to come to him. Ivan put gentleness into his tone, but it took nearly a day to win the dog, until with Peter’s help he could brush him and wash him. After soft words and a good supper, Rubles no longer cowered and whined, but gazed at Ivan with a wondering love in his eyes, and beat his tail on the floor, and licked Ivan’s hand. And Ivan felt a strange glow in his heart.

So all was well within. But without? What of the broken sill and the brown tumbled garden thick with last year’s weeds? “A house like this cannot live in a garden like that,” said Ivan in a cheerful voice. “We must clean it up.”

So they went to work, while Rubles sat on his haunches to look at them. And a neighbor passing by stopped to watch, perplexed and astounded and scarcely recognizing the two who worked.

“What are you staring at, neighbor?” called Ivan. “Come in to see our lily. But first go fetch your good wife.”

And this the neighbor did, in haste and astonishment, eager to be friendly at last to the old man and his little boy.

For seven days the lily glowed and gleamed on the windowsill, and all the life around it was transformed. Then on the seventh day it vanished. There was no trace of it to be found, though Ivan and Peter searched for it everywhere. But when Ivan looked at Peter’s face he thought, “The lily glows there still.” When they saw the clean pure house, and spoke with love to each other, and greeted their neighbors, and tended the growing things in the new garden, each thought to himself, “The lily still lives, though we see it no longer.”

Of course, the meaning of the lily and Easter was still alive in their hearts, for it had transformed Ivan and all in his life.

Easter is a day of transformation. The story of the Passion and Resurrection is the greatest love story ever told.

What does sin do? It changes us, usually little by little. Deep down we all have flaws. In this though is the incredible love of God. A little look at things one shouldn't look at and a person starts objectifying people; a little gossip and reputations are destroyed; a little little bit of harsh judgment and a person can start turning into having hatred in their heart; a little bit of pride and arrogance and suddenly a parent or spouse goes from loving family member to tyrant; a loose temper and suddenly people even family are fearful of someone; a bit of selfishness and a person starts using and manipulating people. The list of sins are endless, but they all start the same way - small - and grow - and you have a situation like Ivan's life; the house and garden overgrown, the people in his life afraid of him, but also you have Ivan who wasn't loved by others and impacted by what they said and thought of him that changed him too. Sin doesn't only impact us, it changes the people around us as it did Ruble and Peter who became afraid.

In all of this, though, there is God, who, like the young man who met Ivan on the road, is coming to meet you and me. God does understand. He chose to do something about sin, and today is our liberation day. As we hear in the second reading on Easter Sunday, “do you not know that a little yaeast leavens all the dough? Clear out the old yeast so that you may become a fresh batch of dough inasmuch as you are unleavened.” Look at your lives and realize that whatever it is you might be battling or justifying is “no big deal” or pretending isn’t a part of you is there, and turn it over to God. Go to Mass. Go to confession. Pray. Let God into your life, not just a little bit of it, but all of it. Know that you have a home here in the Catholic Church where you encounter Jesus in a unique way in the Eucharist in His Church. Thousands are entering the Church this year, including many here at Saint Joes because they recognize this longing in their heart for the God who is love - so come to know that love remembering we are all on a journey. Most all of us are like Ivan at the start of the story; not a “bad” person per se but also someone who may have changed due to the choices we make. Release yourself from shame, and know that God loves you more than you can ever imagine. Be not afraid, for Jesus is not there to shame you but to love you and me. We respond to that love with spiritual

maturity that requires asking ourselves the hard questions, and seeing how our choices have impacted ourselves and one another, but then getting to work like Ivan did, working with Jesus to do the spiritual spring cleaning with grace and mercy by learning from our mistakes, and striving to become better.

And lastly, remember the lilies before our altar, and in your home, will slump and fade, but the lily will live on in you. If we open up our eyes, there is need all around us.

Maybe you'll see some of them later today when you gather with loved ones. The best gift a person can receive is that of peace, and it is given when we listen, when we forgive, when we pray with someone, when we show compassion, when we give people hope that there is a better tomorrow. So many in the world are blind to sin, so while we stand with them, there is also the challenge that comes when we name sin for what it is in this world, but also help others to overcome it. Through our patience, our compassion, our acts of mercy, we can make such a huge difference and change people.

As the Easter story continues, next week we will hear of Jesus meeting the apostles, and the first words He will say at this moment are “peace.” Like the apostles, locked up in the room, so we too can be locked up in fear - fear of what others in the family or people we know will think, fear of the “real us” being known, fear of the past or the future. Ivan had that fear, and so did Peter and Rubles and everyone in his life. Fear is powerful, but far greater is that power of love. Jesus meets the apostles where they are at, and does the same for us. So be not afraid to let Him know the real you - and let His peace set you free. Sin is powerful stuff and can ruin a soul. But today is our day of victory and liberation - so let us let go and let God, coming as we are to Him, and like the apostles and women who left the empty tomb, help to fill this world with hope and peace by letting others know they are loved and welcome, and how truly amazing grace is - for the lily does live in you, so let it bloom with the grace of Jesus who loves you more than you can ever imagine.