

Remarks at an Easter Prayer Breakfast March 30, 2016

Vice President Joe Biden. Good morning, everyone. This is—

Audience members. Good morning!

Vice President Biden. This is one of our favorite events. And it's an honor to be with so many faith leaders and lay faithful this one last time for Easter in the White House—with us, anyway. And—

Audience members. No.

Vice President Biden. Well, I'll tell you what, it's been a great honor. It's been a great honor. He's not bad to work for either, you know what I mean? [*Laughter*]

My wife Jill, whenever she wants to make sure I get the message that she wants to deliver to me that morning, literally, she tapes it on the mirror while I'm shaving. [*Laughter*] You think I'm joking. I'm not joking. And about a year and a half ago—a little longer, actually, almost 2 years ago—she taped a quote on my mirror at home in Wilmington, which is still there, and it's a quote from Kierkegaard. He said, "Faith sees best in the dark." Faith sees best in the dark. And all of you know better than anyone that faith is a gift from God. And because faith works best when you know the least. Faith works best when you're most frightened, in my view. And faith works best when you're not exactly sure where to go.

And I know there's a lot of fear and unease around the world. The President and I travel around the world a lot, and all you got to do is just look at the recent attacks in Belgium and Turkey and Pakistan. And while fear is understandable, exploiting that fear is absolutely unacceptable.

Audience members. Right!

Vice President Biden. When innocent people are ostracized simply because of their faith, when we turn our backs on the victims of evil and persecution, it's just wrong.

So it's up to us—and you've been the leaders in this country—to recognize that fear, but also try to allay that fear and to help people understand that what unites us is a lot more than

what divides us. And it's embodied in just not what we believe, but what we say.

We all practice the same basic faith, but different faiths. I happen to be a practicing Catholic, and I grew up learning from the nuns and the priests who taught me what we used to call Catholic social doctrine. And—but it's not fundamentally different than a doctrine of any of the great confessional faiths. It's, what you do to the least among us, you do unto me. It's, we have an obligation to one another. It's, we cannot serve ourselves at the expense of others and that we have a responsibility to future generations.

All faiths have a version of these teachings, and we all practice and preach that we should practice what we say: opening doors to the victims of war, as the President has been trying to do, a war of terrorism and oppression; accepting people of all faiths and respecting their right to practice their religion as they choose or choose not to practice any religion; resisting the urge to let our fears overcome what we value most: our openness, our freedom, and our freedom to practice our faith.

And a faith that sees and shines light in dark moments is what you've preached. And my favorite hymn in my church is based on the 91st Psalm, Mr. President. It's "On Eagle's Wings." And it's my wish for all of you. You may remember the refrain. It says: "He will raise you up on eagle's wings, and bear you on the breath of dawn. Make you to shine like the Sun, and hold you in the palm of His hand."

That's my wish for all of you because we desperately need you at this time to reinforce a sense of confidence and faith in the American people, to appear—to appeal, as Lincoln said, to their better angels.

And I'm grateful to have stood by someone these last 7 years who understands this—and I mean this—understands it to his core. It's stamped in his DNA. It's who he is. I've served with eight Presidents; I've never been with anyone who has more character than this man and has faith.

So, ladies and gentlemen, let me introduce you to my friend and yours: the President of the United States, Barack Obama.

The President. Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you. Please, everybody, have a seat. Well, good morning, everybody.

Audience members. Good morning!

The President. Welcome to the White House. It is so good to be with you again. We had to change up the format a little bit because I think I've got 30 world leaders for dinner tomorrow—[laughter]—in an effort to constrain the threat of nuclear materials getting into the wrong hands. So it's a good cause. [Laughter] But when you have folks over—I'm sure all of you have the same experience—you've got to clean up—[laughter]—do a little vacuuming, make sure that, you know—[laughter]. Well, for those of you who have kids, make sure that they didn't do something when you weren't looking that the guests will discover. [Laughter] Some vegetables they didn't want to eat. [Laughter]

So we're not at our usual round table of fellowship, but the spirit is still here. And I know that I speak for all of you in feeling lucky that we've had such an extraordinary Vice President in Joe Biden, whose faith has been tested time and time again, and has been able to find God in places that sometimes, for a lot of us, is hard to see.

Audience members. Right.

The President. So I'm blessed to have him as a friend as well as a colleague.

This is a little bittersweet: my final Easter Prayer Breakfast as President. So I want to begin by thanking all of you for all your prayers over the year. I know they have kept us going. It has meant so much to me. It's meant so much to my family. I want to thank you most of all for the incredible ministries that you're doing all around the country, because we've had a chance to work together and partner with you, and we have seen the good works—the deeds and not just words—that so many of you have carried out.

And since 2010, this has become a cherished tradition. I know all of you have had a very busy Holy Week and the week leading up to

Holy Week and the week before that. [Laughter] And I had a wonderful Easter morning at the Alfred Street Baptist Church, and I want to thank Pastor Wesley for his leadership. Pastor, outstanding sermon.

The—he was telling a few stories of his youth, talking about going to the club. [Laughter] I'm just saying. [Laughter] And since he's also from Chicago, I knew the club he was talking about. [Laughter] But it all led to a celebration of the resurrection, I want to be clear. [Laughter] There was a—

Vice President Biden. Actually, it was a resurrection.

The President. It started with the club, but it ended up with the resurrection. [Laughter]

And his outstanding and handsome young sons are with him here. And so we want to thank him for an outstanding service.

Here at the White House, we have not had to work as hard as all of you, but we did have to deal with the Easter Egg Roll. [Laughter] Imagine thousands and thousands of children hopped up on sugar—[laughter]—running around your backyard, surrounded by mascots and Muppets and Shaquille O'Neal. [Laughter] For 12 hours. [Laughter] That was my Easter weekend. [Laughter] So we set aside this morning to come together in prayer and reflection and quiet. [Laughter]

Now, as Joe said, in light of recent events, this gathering takes on more meaning. Around the world, we have seen horrific acts of terrorism, most recently Brussels, as well as what happened in Pakistan: innocent families, mostly women and children, Christians and Muslims. And so our prayers are with the victims, their families, the survivors of these cowardly attacks.

And as Joe mentioned, these attacks can foment fear and division. They can tempt us to cast out the stranger, strike out against those who don't look like us or pray exactly as we do. And they can lead us to turn our backs on those who are most in need of help and refuge. That's the intent of the terrorists, is to weaken our faith, to weaken our best impulses, our better angels.

And Pastor preached on this this weekend, and I know all of you did too, as I suspect, or in your own quiet ways were reminded if Easter means anything, it's that you don't have to be afraid. We drown out darkness with light—

Audience members. That's right.

The President. And we heal hatred with love.

Audience members. Yes.

The President. And we hold on to hope. And we think about all that Jesus suffered and sacrificed on our behalf: scorned, abandoned, shunned, nail-scarred hands bearing the injustice of his death and carrying the sins of the world.

And it's difficult to fathom the full meaning of that act. Now, Scripture tells us, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." Because of God's love, we can proclaim, "Christ is risen!"

Audience members. Yes.

The President. Because of God's love, we have been given this gift of salvation. Because of Him, our hope is not misplaced, and we don't have to be afraid.

And as Christians have said through the years, "We are Easter people, and Alleluia is our song!" We are Easter people, people of hope and not fear.

Now, this is not a static hope. This is a living and breathing hope. It's not a gift we simply receive, but one we must give to others, a gift to carry forth. I was struck last week by an image of Pope Francis washing the feet of refugees: different faiths, different countries. And what a powerful reminder of our obligations, if in fact we're not afraid and if in fact we hope and if in fact we believe, that it's something that we have to give.

His Holiness said this Easter Sunday, God "enables us to see with His eyes of love and compassion those who hunger and thirst, strangers and prisoners, the marginalized and the outcast, the victims of oppression and violence."

To do justice, to love kindness, that's what all of you collectively are involved in in your own ways each and every day: feeding the hungry, healing the sick, teaching our children,

housing the homeless, welcoming immigrants and refugees. And in that way, you are teaching all of us what it means when it comes to true discipleship. It's not just words. It's not just getting dressed and looking good on Sunday. But it's service, particularly for the least of these.

And whether fighting the scourge of poverty or joining with us to work on criminal justice reform and giving people a second chance in life, you have been on the front lines of delivering God's message of love and compassion and mercy for His children.

And I have to say that over the last 7 years, I could not have been prouder to work with you. We have built partnerships that have transcended partisan affiliation, that have transcended individual congregations and even faiths, to form a community that's bound by our shared ideals and rooted in our common humanity. And that community I believe will endure beyond the end of my Presidency, because it's a living thing that all of you are involved with all around this country and all around the world.

And our faith changes us. I know it's changed me. It renews in us a sense of possibility. It allows us to believe that although we are all sinners and that at times we will falter, there's always the possibility of redemption. Every once in a while, we might get something right, we might do some good; that there's the presence of grace; and that we, in some small way, can be worthy of this magnificent love that God has bestowed on us.

You remind me all of that each and every day. And you have just been incredible friends and partners, and I could not be prouder to know all of you. I thank you for sharing in this fellowship. I pray that our time together will strengthen our souls and fortify our faith and renew our spirit, that we will continue to build a nation and a world that is worthy of His many blessings.

And I want to remind you all that after a good chunk of sleep when I get out of here, I'm going to be right out there with you doing some work. [*Laughter*] So you're not rid of me yet, even after we're done with the Presidency.

But I am going to take 3, 4 months where I just sleep. [Laughter] And I hope you all don't mind that.

So with that, I would like to invite Reverend Doctor Derrick Harkins for our opening prayer.

NOTE: The President spoke at approximately 9:50 a.m. in the State Dining Room at the

White House. In his remarks, he referred to Howard-John Wesley, pastor, Alfred Street Baptist Church in Alexandria, VA, and his sons Howard-John Wesley II and Cooper R. Wesley; Shaquille O'Neal, former center, National Basketball Association; and Derrick Harkins, former pastor, Nineteenth Street Baptist Church in Washington, DC.

Remarks During a Lunch With Commutation Recipients and an Exchange With Reporters March 30, 2016

The President. Well, this has been an extraordinary lunch that I've had a chance to have here with some extraordinary people. As all of you know, it has been one of my top priorities for us to bring about a more sensible, more effective approach to our criminal justice system, particularly when it comes to drug crimes. And part of that has been to try to make sure that we have, on the front end, sensible sentencing, rehabilitation, education, and training in prison to prepare people so that they're not going back to the old mistakes that they made before.

Part of it has been to really reinvigorate our commutations and pardons process, because it is my strong belief that by exercising these Presidential powers, I have the chance to show people what a second chance can look like, that I can highlight the individuals who are getting these second chances and doing extraordinary things with their lives.

And this is just a small sample of individuals who were—whose sentences were commuted, a couple by me, a couple by President Bush, a couple by President Clinton. They're all at different stages of this new chapter in their lives, but the stories are extraordinary. You've got individuals sitting around this table who are now attorneys themselves and raising children and about to get married. You've got folks who are inspirational speakers and working with those who are reentering society after having done their time and helping people make adjustments.

To my left right here, just a good example, Phillip Emmert, who lives in Iowa City. Phillip, who served in our United States Army, was arrested and convicted of distributing methamphetamines, received a 27-year sentence. His wife, while he was in prison, had an accident that paralyzed her, had a small child at home. But Phil had the strength to do everything he could to get trained to learn a whole bunch of systems and ended up specializing in heating and air conditioning systems. He was commuted by President Bush, was able to find a job with the VA; today, is gainfully employed. His boss loves him. [Laughter] He's doing great work, is at the same time caring for his wife, who's still disabled. Has been a terrific father, is part of a Bible study group and a leader in the community. And this is an example of what we mean when we talk about second chances. And I could tell you just as compelling stories about everybody sitting at this table.

So I wanted to have lunch with them in part so that I could hear their stories and be able to relay them to the American peoples to make sure that folks are understood not just as a number, but these are individuals with families and children and parents who love them, and have made mistakes, but take responsibility for it.

I also wanted to have this lunch to learn how can we improve the process of making sure this—that people, after they've served their time, can reintegrate in the society effectively. And I've got some very interesting ideas about some of the barriers that we continue to put in place that make it harder for people to readjust