

The Easter Vigil (A)  
(Matthew 28:1-10)  
11.04.2020

*After the Sabbath, and towards dawn on the first day of the week, Mary of Magdala and the other Mary went to visit the sepulchre. They saw the angel of the Lord who came and rolled the stone away. When the angel rolled the stone away this was not to release the body of Jesus. Jesus was not seen to exit the sepulchre at that moment. The stone was rolled away so that the women and the guards could see that Jesus was no longer in the tomb. They were told: Look. He is not here, for He has risen, as He said He would.*

The actual physical resurrection of Jesus was not something anyone witnessed. It was a hidden happening. Nonetheless, those who bore testimony to Jesus' rising from the dead could speak of it as a reality which had occurred and this without the shadow of a doubt. How come? Because they were graced to have encountered the Risen Lord. They could announce boldly what has become the Church's traditional Easter greeting: *Christ is risen!*

Note what is said there. *Christ is risen!* Our Easter feast is not just the commemoration of an event that took place once at a particular moment in time past; it is the celebration of an ever-present reality.

Mary's is not the only one to have testified that she had an encounter with the Risen Lord. The New Testament speaks of many other resurrection appearances. That Jesus manifested Himself to those who knew Him in the flesh is one thing, but it is not all. He continued and He continues to show Himself to be alive.

Significantly, the Apostle Paul, who must surely be counted among the greatest witnesses to Christ's resurrection in the whole of the New Testament, never ever laid claim to having met with the historical Jesus, but he did speak freely of having encountered Christ. That meeting so changed the course of Saul's life that he was known by a new name thereafter. Saul would never be the same again. He was now Paul. Saul's name-change signified the inner transformation brought about within him. Nothing would ever be the same for this man who met the Risen Christ.

Our lives too can change through contact with the Risen Lord.

It is vital for us to realise that the resurrection of Jesus is a life-transforming grace – and it is one that we are all called to experience in our lives. The Risen Lord comes to manifest Himself to us now during this Solemn Vigil. He comes to us wherever we are at present in our lives.

What a consolation His coming to us is at the heart of the terrible night our world is traversing at this moment in time!

Just as Christ first revealed Himself to be alive after His Passion to those who were troubled and distressed, saddened and perturbed by the shocking events they were led to traverse, so tonight the Risen Lord comes to all who are suffering affliction to bring them relief. He draws alongside the many who are enduring pain and loss to comfort them. He reveals Himself to those whose hearts are filled with uncertainty and fear to offer them reassurance. He stretches out His helping hand to the many who are feeling helpless. He raises up those who are totally downcast. He restores hope to those reduced to a state of despair.

There can be little doubt that dismay and distress hold a multitude of people in their grip at this time of pandemic. In the context of what increasingly appears to be a global disaster, in a world filled with worries and concern, anxiety and paralysing trepidation, the message which prefaced the angel's proclamation is so important for us to hear: *Do not be afraid.*

*Do not be afraid!*

Those encouraging words are repeated more than once in tonight's short Resurrection Gospel. The first time they were spoken by the angel; the second time they were pronounced by the Risen Lord Himself.

Immediately after Jesus spoke those words to Mary, the following instruction was given to her: *Go and tell my brothers that they must leave for Galilee; they will see me there.* The message Mary was called to relay to *the brothers* was that the Risen Christ would meet with them in a familiar place. The disciples were from Galilee. This region was their home-place. The Lord still gives His disciples – each one of us – *rendez-vous* in familiar places: there where we live; in our homes and normal life-settings, in the significant relationships of our lives.

Church doors may be locked and people barred access to places of Christian assembly, but this cannot hold the Risen Christ captive. Our enclosed spaces will not hinder the Risen Lord from meeting with us wherever we are. The Risen Lord who kept His promise and went on to meet with His disciples in Galilee, also came and stood in their midst in other places as well – including that Upper Room in Jerusalem, where some of them had socially isolated themselves and were barricaded *behind closed doors out of fear.*

This thought reassures us that Christ who is as alive for all eternity is as present to us as He was to those to whom He appeared during the first Easter days: men, women and children who were anguish, disturbed, disheartened, disorientated, lost, totally bereft.

The Risen Lord is with us here in this abbey church. He is with you wherever you are tonight. *Nothing can separate us from His love.* Christ is with those among you who are watching this liturgy together with your spouse; or along with other family members; or with your brothers or sisters in Religious community. He is especially near to those of you who are alone at this hour. He is in the communion we share, even though miles and even vast seas and continents may separate us. We may perhaps self isolating physically, but we are not cut off from each other spiritually. You are connected to us, united with us and we are with you: we enjoy spiritual communion in the Risen Christ whose love has brought us together and makes us one.

At the heart of this night, let us savour anew the angel's message which Christ in His turn reiterated: *Do not be afraid.* May those reassuring words resonate in our hearts! May they find profound echo within all of us throughout the coming Easter Day of fifty days!

The Risen Christ greets His people on Easter morning murmuring these words into their hearts: *I am risen. I am with you. My hand is laid upon you.* (Those are the words we will sing in the Introit of Easter Day.) Jesus murmurs that message ever so gently, but nonetheless insistently, into our hearts right now. He wants us to understand what those words mean. What He is saying to us tonight amounts to this: *The stone that may have separated us for a time (the stone over your heart) is now rolled away. Even if you have no one with you, I am close to you. I am always closer to you than you are to yourself. I am close to you in and through those who really care for you – be that by your side, or be that from afar. I am so close to you that I live within you. Your life is mine and my life is yours!*

The icon of the resurrection which we welcomed and presented for veneration just after the proclamation of the Resurrection Gospel tonight depicts the Risen Christ as having descended into hell, from whence He exited victorious, breaking the gates of Hades. The Resurrection icon shows the gates broken open. Death is depicted to be trampled underfoot. The gloriously resurrected Christ is seen to be drawing languishing Adam and Eve forth from death's vicious hold upon them. Contemplating this icon, the psalmist's words come to mind: *Whom or what*

*shall I fear? So too the exclamations of Paul: Who or what can keep Christ's love from us? Death can't and life can't. The powers of hell itself cannot keep God's love away.*

However painful it is not to be gathered with each other as *Family of God* in our regular Church communities, might I suggest that we try to see a positive aspect to this Easter celebration?

Let us strive to see how God can use – and most certainly is using – even the horrible circumstances of the present moment to help us experience Easter where and how we are meant to experience it: in our Galilee; in the context and circumstances of our daily lives; making us long for restored relationships between us.

Let me end by sharing a text by CS Lewis – an excerpt from his work *The Screwtape Letters*. These lines, which were written in 1942, are particularly poignant for this year 2020. Lewis imagines a dialogue take place between Satan, the one who divides, and Jesus, the One who unites. He foresees Christ, the gatherer, outwitting the ruse and foiling the vicious attempts of the tempter to paralyse our world and discourage its inhabitants. Lewis has Satan declare his cards thus: *I will cause anxiety, fear and panic. I will shut down business, schools, places of worship and sports events. I will cause economic turmoil.* To these threats, Lewis has Jesus reply: *I will bring together neighbours, restore the family unit. I will bring dinner back to the kitchen table. I will help people slow down their lives and appreciate what really matters. I will teach my children to rely on me and not the world. I will teach my children to trust me and not their money and resources.*

The lesson of this Easter for many of us – indeed, I dare to hope, for all of us – is that even though we are wise to be isolating physically in our bid to hinder the spread of the coronavirus, we would be wiser still to unite uniting spiritually with those from whom we have distanced.

Let us celebrate the fact that even in our respective solitudes the Risen Lord is with us all. Moreover He is calling us to be with one another, in spirit – as Paul puts it when writing to the Galatians: *all one in Christ!*

*Ut congregemur in unum!*

May He gather us together as one!