

The Easter Vigil (B)
(Mark 16:1-7)
03.04.2021

Mary of Magdala, Mary, the mother of James, and Salome, headed towards the tomb *early in the morning of the first day of the week*. They knew that they were going to come against an obstacle. They were aware that this obstacle was one they would not be able to overcome relying on their own strength alone. We are told that the women had been saying to one another: *Who will roll the stone away for us from the entrance to the tomb?* Note the question. It was: Who will do this for us? It was not: How will we roll the stone away? There is a world of difference between the two questions! The women's question reveals that they were clearly convinced that, of themselves, they did not have the strength required to accomplish what was asked of them. The two Marys and Salome humbly recognised that if they were to fulfil their mission (if they were to minister to Jesus, by caring for His body) then, they would need help from another source. What is striking is that these women set out on their journey nonetheless. It is as if they were sure that, through the help of another, the help of others, who would be sent their way, they would manage to fulfil their mission. The women held a quiet assurance in their hearts that what was beyond them would come about, because God would intervene in their favour.

I suspect we have all found ourselves in similar circumstances along life's way. We will have headed into situations, believing something to be asked of us in the Lord's service, convinced that what was required of us was beyond our own strength alone. We just knew that we had to go where we were sent to accomplish what was asked of us. We trusted that what we were called to initiate would come to fruition by the help of God's grace. We trusted in the Lord to supply for what we knew was lacking in us. In so doing, we discovered what the Bible tells us in the story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac: *The Lord will provide*. Those who live their lives with faith in divine providence will understand what I am talking about here.

How often people who are engaged in the Lord's service are asked to set out on a path, without knowing in advance where it will lead. They embark upon a venture of faith, oblivious not only to the journey's end, but even to all the stages that will be part of it! It is as if it is the Lord's way to ask people to engage with what is beyond themselves alone, confidently trusting that He will be with them. The only guarantee given to us is the Lord's promise to be with us; His assurance that He will come through for us, in due season, at the required moment. This was the case with Abraham, Moses, Joshua and so many others. These men were all called to set out on a venture of faith, embracing the unknown. In the case of Abraham it is made clear that he just did not know either his final destination or exactly what he was going to be asked to do when he got there. Nonetheless, the patriarch embarked upon his journey. We see this same principle played out in various vocational stories in the Scriptures, both in the Old and the New Testament. The Bible is peppered with many accounts of women and men who were confided missions which exceeded their capabilities... women and men who knew that the Lord required of them the seemingly impossible. We cannot but marvel at the degree of faith exercised by those who were called to take up the challenges presented to them. The audacity of these women and men, commissioned by God, stemmed from an inner conviction that since God had asked them to do some particular task, He would supply for their needs at the appropriate time and in the best possible way. They just had to trust, believing that the Lord would help them accomplish the mission confided to them in His service, for the good of His people.

Given the emphasis on the role of women in the resurrection account read this night, I find myself thinking especially of certain female figures in the Bible who were used by God to engage in, what the psalmist calls, *marvels beyond us*. I find myself halting to consider, from among their number, the figure of Esther, in particular... and this for one simple reason. Esther's story manifests in a remarkable way how God's mighty help was given in a completely hopeless situation. It reminds us of what is a fairly constant experience in the unfolding of the history of God's people. From our reading of the Bible (and this is very evident in the story of Esther) we are led to see that it is frequently God's way to use seemingly powerless people to labour, exerting great strength derived from His own *power and might* at work in their weakness. From the New Testament the names of various feminine figures who were mightily used by God could also be evoked. I think primarily of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, but I would want to stress that she is not the only female disciple who was greatly used by God in New Testament times. If I single out Mary, the Mother of Jesus, this is because in the story of the Annunciation it is made perfectly clear that what was asked of her was humanly *impossible!* And yet, it is made equally clear in the text that *with God all things are possible*.

The women we meet in tonight's Resurrection Gospel account – Mary of Magdala, Mary, mother of James, and Salome – are three New Testament women who engaged themselves with extraordinary human courage, based upon spiritual stamina, rooted in the firm confidence and trust in God they held in their hearts. If in Mark's Gospel account the women do not know who will roll the stone away, in Matthew's version of the story things are shown to have been looked after: *An angel of the Lord came down from heaven and rolled the stone away and sat on it.* (We will sing those words in the Office of Lauds of Easter Day.) The last point reinforces the fact that the obstacle was overcome by God's agency. I see an important lesson to be given to us in Mark's resurrection account read tonight. The evangelist draws to our attention the importance of not having everything worked out for ourselves, down to the very last detail, before engaging ourselves in the Lord's service. Perhaps I could frame that another way and say that Mark's resurrection story shows us that we do not have to be in complete control of everything. No. We have simply to engage ourselves, doing what we are told, at God's behest. A great temptation for many people – many of us – is to want to be in control of everything, including what is asked of us by God. We want to have it all worked out. We would like to know in advance exactly how everything will unfold in any process we engage ourselves in. We can be inclined to imagine that we are (at least that we should be) in charge. In God's work, we are not! When we engage in *the work of God*, thinking it is *our work*, sooner or later we will be disappointed. We will discover that we cannot control and guide things according to our plans, simply because it is not our place to do so. Understand me. I am not advocating a total lack of direction in our everyday life or in our ministry. I am not saying that there is absolutely no need for us to have some idea of what we are about in both spheres of our existence. We can and should plan ahead, but we should always leave room for God to intervene, free to change our plan of action. In the spiritual life, we have to accept that we are not in charge at all – even though we might like to imagine that we are. The spiritual life is guided by the impulse of God's Holy Spirit. In the spiritual life, we are very definitely not to think that we are somehow self-sufficient. If and when we act in self-sufficient ways, we make it clear that we consider we no longer need God. As a result, we leave little or no room for Him to act in our lives.

Tonight's Gospel story shows us how the women had made some arrangements. They had a plan put together. They had bought spices and prepared them for the anointing of Jesus' body. They had located the place where Jesus' body had been laid and they headed in that direction,

but they still hadn't worked out who would roll the stone away. It is as if they had prepared things, but only up to a certain point. They had, as it were, left room, manoeuvre space, a zone of freedom for God to be able to intervene in their plan. It seems to me that a lesson is given to us here. It is that in our lives we need to allow God to have a free hand. We must leave room, manoeuvre space, freedom, for the Holy Spirit to be able to accomplish God's work in our lives. We should not seek to be in absolute control of our existence.

Like the women in tonight's resurrection Gospel, we may see obstacles ahead of us as we set about doing what we feel called to do for the Lord. It is fairly certain that we will come up against impediments of one sort or another, when we engage in any venture that is worth undertaking. We are rarely led along a road on which we only ever find green lights. There may be red lights on our path; at the very least amber lights time and again. These need to be factored into the equation. That being said, like the women, we are called to set out nonetheless. We are called to journey in faith; holding trust in God in our hearts. The Lord will guide us step by step along the way. Usually, He does not provide us with a detailed roadmap. We are left to *feel our way forward*. The Lord indicates the first step to us... and then, only little by little, does He show us the rest of the way to follow. Usually, the Lord will show us what we need to do only when we need to know what this is. We can – and most probably will – come up against barriers along the way. The greatest obstacles we have to cross are most often found within ourselves. Many things can hinder the free flow of divine life, the free flow of grace, within us: impediments such as anger, resentment, misunderstanding, fear... and we could add to that list. A sense of our own inadequacy will probably be the greatest obstacle most of us are faced with.

Even though what is asked of us by God can appear to us to be simply *a marvel beyond us*, I think of words taken from the writings of the Apostle Paul as spurring us on. Paul writes: *Love compels us*. There are times when love compels us to undertake the seemingly impossible. In his Rule for Monks St Benedict speaks of *obedience when faced with impossible demands*, telling us that, when it is made clear to us that the demand made of us is upheld by our Superior, then this is what God is asking of us. However deficient our resources may be, we are to obey trustingly: *Ex Caritate... Out of Love*.

The women hurried on their way that Easter morning because *love compelled them*. It was love (the Lord's love for them – and for all His people, for all people; and the women's evident love for Jesus) that led God to send His angel to move that stone away from the entrance of the tomb... a task beyond the woman's strength; something impossible to them alone.

Amen!