

Easter Day (C)
(Acts 10:34.27-43 / John 20:1-9)
17.04.2022

As I read John's resurrection Gospel account this morning a vivid childhood memory came to mind. I recalled running up the street where I grew up in Belfast as I hastily made my way to serve the Easter Sunday morning Eucharist. I recall how I thought of myself that morning as not running alone, but in the company of Peter and John as they made their way to see for themselves what the women had told them they had witnessed not long before: the empty tomb. (In fact, I had in mind that morning a scene from a film I had watched the previous days in which the two disciples were depicted running to the tomb with Handel's Hallelujah chorus providing faint background music.)

As I recall that Easter morning of more than five decades ago, it is as if I can still feel the ground under my feet as I ran... and that brings me back to the question I posed myself all those years ago: What did Peter and John feel on the first Easter morning as their feet hit the ground? What was racing through their minds as they hastened on their way? What was going on in their hearts that first Easter morning?

I suspect their thoughts and feelings were a bit confused and that Peter's were especially mixed. Peter was probably still trying to come to terms with the fact that he had messed up badly in Jesus' regard just a few days before. In the Passion Narrative are told that a surge of guilt and shame had overcome him when he had heard the cock crow and remembered Jesus' prediction that he would deny ever having known Him.

Was Peter still thinking of his denial of Jesus?

We can expect that to some extent he was. That memory will be brought home to him all the more a little later on in the story when on the shore of the lake he is led to encounter the Risen Christ. In their dialogue then Peter will have his triple denial recalled to him by Jesus' thrice repeated question: Do you love me? The fact that Peter is forgiven will be signified by the renewed confidence Jesus places in him when he instructs him to care for and feed His lambs and His sheep.

Whatever raced through Peter's mind as he ran to the tomb, before long Peter found himself at its entrance.

The text emphasises that although John had reached the tomb first he had not gone into it. We are told that John stooped down and looked into the dark burial chamber, but went no further than that. That John waited for Peter's arrival, leaving it to Peter to go in first may point to John's deference in regard to the one to whom Jesus had confided the charge of the company of the Twelve, but I see yet another significance behind the fact that Peter was the first to enter the tomb – and, to begin with, he entered it alone.

I see Peter's initial solitary gesture as having provided him with the opportunity to live a moment of truth about himself – truth with himself. I suggest that standing in that dark and empty space, Peter will have touched for a moment into his own emptiness and darkness. If on Mount Tabor Peter had been blinded by the dazzling light that emanated from the Transfigured Christ and consoled by the presence of Moses and Elijah who bore witness to the Lord at that moment of grace; now, at this moment of truth, standing in the darkness of Jesus' burial chamber, the apostle was given insight into the fact that his life had been shrouded by his denial of the Master.

As I think of Peter standing in the empty tomb, I think of the deep sense of void he must have felt... a realisation of the void which much have invaded and accompanied him since that sorrowful moment when he had said not just once but three times: I am not a disciple.

By the words he had spoken to save his skin, as it were, Peter had not only denied Christ, but himself; his true identity.

Standing where the body of his Crucified Lord once had lain, we can take it that Peter would have been led to acknowledge the pain and desolation the Master's loss had caused him. He must have felt so terribly alone at that moment. Suffering always makes us feel alone.

Reading the text this morning – recalling all we have already seen to have played out in the relationship between Peter and his Lord all these past days, since last Sunday's reading of Luke's Passion narrative – I think we would do well to look to Peter attentively yet again. Where we meet Peter this morning, I see Peter beckoning to us from where he stood on the first Easter morn. I hear him inviting us to dare to step into the tomb with him. I hear Peter say to us that we should dare to face up to the truth about ourselves and accept that we are, all of us, just like him – fallible, feeble, fragile, fickle creatures; men and women who are weak; people who have messed up along the way.

I believe we are being called to recognise this morning that we are all of us persons who just like Peter are capable of breaking under strain... and that we will have done so. Who among us can say that he or she has never denied the Lord in one way or another? Who among us can say that we have never betrayed the trust of the One who has dared to place so much trust in us?

It is as if, not only Peter, but, the dark and empty tomb itself, cries out to us this morning, inviting us to enter into its bowels to face up to our own darkness and feel our own emptiness.

Are there not times when we are void and desolate beings?

Bewildering as the darkness may seem to us at those times when we are in the thick of it, this experience can actually be the space provided by God to lead to our growth.

Often the way of the natural world which sees much growth takes place in darkness – be that under the surface of the earth or in a mother's womb – is applicable to the spiritual life as well. The American Cistercian monk, Thomas Merton, shared his experience in these words: Remaining in His darkness (that is, the Lord's darkness) has fed me and made me to grow. While most of us would not be prompt to say that when the darkness engulfs us we feel we are growing, with hindsight we may be ready to do so.

It is striking that the first experience of the resurrection of Jesus that leads to belief is not a visible appearance, but His apparent absence.

It is seeing the empty tomb that leads John to confess Christ's resurrection. We are told: John saw and He believed. He saw the emptiness and he believed!

While we are not told that Peter came to belief at the empty tomb, we can take it that the moment Peter spent therein was a significant one for him on his faith journey; one which surely contributed to his growth. It was undoubtedly a step along the way that would lead Peter to renewed faith in Christ. Peter would be led in that subsequent scene on the shores of the lake to a sense not only of restoration to ministry but further progress in the charge confided to him. (CF. John 21)

What was true for the disciples at the first Easter can prove to be true for so many of us today. The seeming loss of Jesus' presence can be precisely what leads to a maturation of our faith. Maybe that is important for us to bear in mind as we make our way through the trial we are

going through as Church today – a trial such that sometimes we may find ourselves asking: Where is the Lord? Has He abandoned us?

If there are moments in our lives when the light shines brightly and Christ's presence is what we might deem to be a visible reality, there are times in our existence when paradoxically the light of God stares us in the face in the form of a glaring darkness.

When what we might call the dazzling light of darkness is part of our experience this need not be seen as an unjust punishment, but perhaps might rather be considered as a really mysterious gift offered to us by the Lord Himself. It may prove to be the obliged passage into an experience of growth in humility of heart and confident dependence upon the Lord.

We should never forget that humility and a sense of dependence upon the Lord are the hallmarks of every true disciple. It was back to these attitudes of heart that Peter needed to be led. At one stage – when he had declared that while all others might falter, he would not do so – Peter had shown himself to be over-confident, cocksure of himself, he needed to be brought to see that he was not just as robust as he imagined himself. His faith was as weak as anyone else's.

In the Passion narrative when the cock crowed Peter is shown to have recalled Jesus' word of warning on the eve of His sacred Passion. Where we see him on the first Easter morning, standing in the dark and empty tomb, the apostle was surely reminded once more that he had no room to be overly sure of himself, just as none of us has room to be over-confident in our own regard.

The truth is that we all carry a certain darkness and emptiness within us. This should not dismay us to the extent that we lose heart. Rather it is a reality that we would do well to own up to – not to get stuck therein, but so that we may move beyond its fearful grip upon us – a fearful grip that will not go of us as long as we deny its existence. As one writer puts it rather poetically: The tomb cries aloud to us – its dead silence presses on the drum of the ear like thunder, saying, 'Look at this, and erase your illusions'.

By the grace of God may all of us be freed from our illusions. One Anglican Religious woman wisely puts us on our guard against the grip our illusions can have upon our lives. She speaks of the Spirit of truth having for mission to help dissolve within us the many illusions about ourselves we hold on to. She speaks of a necessary process of disillusionment in all our lives, for, as she notes, illusions, whether about God, other people, or oneself must be smashed if a Christian is to grow to maturity.

As we contemplate the empty tomb, let us draw consolation from what it says to us. I believe that what the empty tomb says to us is this: Do not be afraid, even of the darkness. Do not lose heart, at those times when it seems to you as if the Lord has disappeared from your life; as if He has been robbed from you.

Christ is not locked away there where we might think Him to be. We love to lock Him somewhere and think that we can find Him in that place where we hold Him safely under lock and key.

The grave clothes left behind in the tomb point to something so many of the resurrection appearances further underline for us. This is the fact that Jesus manifests Himself to us clothed in so many ways. Not in grave clothes, but dressed as a gardener, someone walking along a shore-line, a person making their way the road as a fellow-traveller, a messenger of peace, someone hungry asking us if we have anything to eat that we might share with Him... Think of all the various resurrection appearances when He took on these guises.

The call and challenge for us is to recognise the Risen Lord in the various guises He now takes upon Himself – dare I say, the various disguises He now chooses to wear, so that He may come to visit us and surprise us by grace.

Amen!