

Gospel: John 20:1-9

On the first day of the week,
Mary of Magdala came to the tomb early in the morning,
while it was still dark,
and saw the stone removed from the tomb.
So she ran and went to Simon Peter
and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and told them,
"They have taken the Lord from the tomb,
and we don't know where they put him."
So Peter and the other disciple went out and came to the tomb.
They both ran, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter
and arrived at the tomb first;
he bent down and saw the burial cloths there, but did not go in.
When Simon Peter arrived after him,
he went into the tomb and saw the burial cloths there,
and the cloth that had covered his head,
not with the burial cloths but rolled up in a separate place.
Then the other disciple also went in,
the one who had arrived at the tomb first,
and he saw and believed.
For they did not yet understand the Scripture
that he had to rise from the dead.

Gospel Study: *Easter Resurrection*

For when Jesus died and rose from the dead, he raised up all of our hopes that we too who die with him shall rise with him; not only in the hereafter, but here and now. This is why I believe that this Gospel, and this solemnity of Jesus' resurrection, is the greatest day of all. It is the greatest feast of the whole year. It's hard to understand the resurrection. It was hard for the early disciples to understand it so it should be no surprise to us that we grapple with its meaning and its significance in our lives but we begin by saying, 'This is at the very centerpiece of our faith.'

This, more than anything, is what we ought to focus on and never lose sight of. In St. Paul's words, if it were not for the resurrection of Christ, then we would be the greatest fools on Earth. There would be no purpose for us in life. There would be no hope for us in eternal life. Today we want to take a hard look at the resurrection and what it means spiritually and theologically and of course scripturally and even pragmatically in our lives.

We begin with a little background context. No single individual ever witnessed Jesus rising from the dead. All that we know that is written in the Gospels is written after the fact of Jesus' resurrection. We don't know how he rose or exactly when he rose. All that we know is that God did raise him up.

It is interesting, in our creed we say, 'Jesus under Pontius Pilate was crucified, died and was buried. He descended into hell,' That is such a misnomer and it causes misunderstanding; I'd like to clarify that because obviously Jesus did not go to what we call 'hell.' There is a better translation and we should say that Jesus went among the dead. In the scriptural mind, it would be the netherworld. The place where they thought the dead went, underneath the Earth. 'Hell' is not the right word there. Jesus did not descend to what we would think of as that place of the absence of God. He went to enter into that same state that all of us will visit at the end of our life.

From there he was placed in the tomb and it's from that tomb that he was raised up by God on the third day. We will see in a moment "on the third" means "on the Lord's day" in God's way.

A word more about resurrection. The resurrection is not resuscitation such as we see in the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Lazarus was resuscitated but then continued on living the life he had previously lived. Resurrection is not reincarnation. It's not coming back to life in another form, whatever that form may be. Resurrection is the greatest graduation to the greatest life; to a whole other world where in the words of Paul (I believe), "No eye has seen, no ear has heard nor has it ever entered anyone's mind what God has prepared for those who love Him." This is what the hope of resurrection offers us.

In the Gospels, which are our only place to go to try to understand what we believe about resurrection, we have two kinds of stories. The first are the empty stories where the Apostles will go and see that Jesus is no longer among the dead; which is the point and what these stories reveal. Then there are the appearance stories where Jesus will appear and they won't even recognize him at first. Today we have the first of the empty stories from John's Gospel.

With that as a bit of background information, we then begin at the very dawning of Jesus' rising. In setting the stage, John describes, "early in the morning on the first day of the week." I just want to highlight those two phrases: "early in the morning." It was the time that the Jewish people called "the last watch of the night" which was between 3 and 6 o'clock in the morning. 6 o'clock would have been the first hour of the day.

It was on the first day of the week. The last day of the week was Saturday for the Jews, the Sabbath. It was that day, based on the pattern of the creation, that they believed they needed to rest as God rested on the seventh day. The last day of the week was the Sabbath day and because of the Sabbath laws they were not permitted to walk very far and so the disciples and friends of Jesus could not visit the tomb because they would have broken the Sabbath rules and regulations. Maybe they didn't visit the tomb for other reasons as well, as we'll hear later as they were locked behind closed doors full of doubt and fear. Part of the reason Mary Magdalene couldn't come there until the first of the week was because the Sabbath wasn't yet completed.

We're told that it was still dark. This is a very important point as any person who appreciates drama will understand the rich symbolism here. When Jesus died, the evangelist writes, darkness covered the whole world. In fact this was the darkest day and the darkest hour of human history. This is the worst tragedy. This is the day that we, the world, killed our God. That truly is the darkest hour of our human history and world. Darkness covered the whole world and John, in painting this dark picture used that darkness/light theme throughout his Gospel. Darkness always

represented those who had not yet come into the light of faith; to know that Jesus was the light of the world.

Darkness can also symbolize the general mood of his friends. We can understand this because we go through periods of darkness ourselves. Emotionally they were in the dark because a part of them had certainly died along with Jesus that day. Intellectually they were in the dark because they didn't understand anything about resurrection even though Jesus had hinted about this and referred to this. The Jewish people at the time did not have a well defined understanding or teaching of the resurrection. Spiritually we know that they were in the dark feeling totally lost without their Lord and Master; their leader and teacher. They were full of doubt and fear as we see later as they're locked in that upper room, scared to death that they will be the next ones to lose their life.

It's in that very dark time that there appears on the stage of this Easter Sunday morning one of the bright lights, one of the great saints, and her name is Mary of Magdala. Magdala is a small town very close to Capernaum on the rim of the Sea of Galilee where Jesus spent most of his public ministry. We don't know anything about her although she suffers a bad reputation as living a life of immorality. We don't know that that's the case, what we do know is she had many demons that had haunted her and hurt her throughout her life and that Jesus had expelled these demons from her and since then she became one of his greatest followers. She followed Jesus all the way to Calvary. Now she followed him all the way to the cemetery. In fact, she was the first one there. We have to ask, 'Why is it Mary of Magdala would be the first to the tomb?' I think it's always love that leads us to be with the person we truly love. That is exactly what will lead us to the Lord.

I often think, 'How can we grow to come closer to Christ?' Just pray to fall in love with him. Just pray to fall in love. It's all about loving. Even as we study the Gospels, hopefully this is only leading us to loving him and in loving him we desire to know him more. I invite us with Mary of Magdala to come to Christ this Easter; to search for his presence in our lives. Where do we go? We go to those places that we call our empty tomb; those places of difficulty and death and disappointment; those places of loss; those places of struggle; those places that are marked as the ashes on our forehead on Ash Wednesday; of sinfulness; those places that are not together, that are hard to go to. It is in those very places that the Lord will come to visit us.

That is what we see here. Mary arrives at this tomb that becomes like a spiritual womb; a place where new life comes forth. She sees that the stone had been moved away and so she goes running to the disciples, to Peter and to John—who is mentioned not as John but as the disciple whom Jesus loved—and says, "The Lord has been taken from the tomb."

Perhaps you know in ancient Palestine that tombs were little caves. This is a very rocky terrain, a very hilly area. There were many little caves and Jesus was placed in one of these caves after being taken down from the cross. We know it to be the tomb set aside for Joseph of Arimathea. It hadn't been used yet so they placed Jesus there as it was close by Golgotha. Golgotha is a Hebrew name that means "Skull Place." The skull is where Jesus was actually crucified, on a little hill near this rock quarry where they had these vertical posts already in line and they carried

the across beam and put him there and then he was taken down and placed immediately—just close by—in this cave.

In front of the cave they always placed this large rock that they would roll over the cave to protect the entrance. When Mary saw that this huge stone had been already rolled away and the tomb was empty, it was very clear to her that someone had come and stolen the body of Jesus. There were known to be grave robbers because sometimes people had treasures buried along with them.

At this point Mary would never have suspected anything else. The disciples and Mary are still in the dark. They have not seen the Lord and they did not understand anything about resurrection. They were as shocked as we would be coming home from a funeral service and walking into our house to see the deceased person who we just saw laid into the ground right there in our living room.

We have to put ourselves in their minds. John and Peter are the first ones she goes to but John is not mentioned. He is mentioned as "the disciple whom Jesus loved." This is John writing this Gospel...maybe he doesn't want to use his own name, maybe he doesn't want to be the center of attention here. Maybe he wants, as I suspect, to let his community see themselves as the beloved disciple. We are being invited to come along to that place where we feel the loss of life; a kind of death to ourselves. We're being invited by this Apostle, Mary of Magdala. I say 'Apostle' because she's the first one to come and bring the good news to others.

Peter and John then go running to the tomb themselves. This is a point not to miss. Just a couple days earlier they were running in the opposite direction. According to John's Gospel, John was the one single disciple to be faithful to Christ at the foot of the cross. All we know is that at this point they experienced a real turnaround—called conversion. We all can experience this when we take more time to turn to the Lord in prayer; to turn to Him in good times and in bad. This is what we're invited to do this holy week: to turn more to the Lord.

It's interesting that this fourth Gospel mentions that John in fact out ran Peter. We suspect that he was probably younger but more so it indicates to John's community now that John held a special position in leading the way. Here is a disciple who had a loving heart and who Jesus loved dearly. This is a disciple we recall early at the Last Supper leaning his head on the heart of Jesus. It is such a beautiful symbol or ritual of his closeness to Christ. Just like we saw with Mary Magdalene, it's that love that leads him to run to the Lord. I love that sense of the passion that overtakes him. Do we have that kind of passion? Do we run after the Lord?

Peter comes along and John has not gone inside. Scripture scholars think that this is a subtle suggestion of the respect paid to Peter who in all of the resurrection accounts, even though Peter clearly had denied the Lord—denied that he knew Him at all—is still given the first place of respect. He's named the first in all these stories of resurrection and he at the tomb is the first one permitted to go inside.

Peter observes the wrappings—the piece of cloth—and notices that it's rolled up neatly by itself. It's interesting, Peter doesn't make anything of it. This is a guy who doesn't get it very quickly.

Frankly I completely identify with him. Peter is a slow learner, as am I. It isn't that these things are hard to conceive mentally. It's a long mile and many years to go from the head to the heart. And it is even longer to really fully integrate this Easter faith into our life.

Special mention is given toward this shroud that is folded up very neatly. The obvious inference here is that a robber, which is common, would just throw things around. They don't care about folding things up neatly afterwards. That's the point of it. This shroud that was discovered is this x-ray vision of this cloth of some man who had been brutally beaten. There are blood stains that have put his whole image on this shroud. It is a great relic of what could well represent a man who had been crucified and scourged in the worst torture.

What is mentioned then is that John, the disciple, walks in and he sees and believes. What does he see? He doesn't see anything that Peter didn't also see. In John's Gospel, a sign is like something that pointed to the greatest reality of Christ. He saw here in the emptiness, this empty room, he saw a sign of Christ's risen presence; which is very hard for the normal eyes to see. What is suggested is that only the eyes of faith could possibly interpret it this way.

John's giving this message to his community—a message to all of us. When we look into the deep dark caverns of our lives—those hollowed out spaces of emptiness and loneliness in our lives—can you see a sign of hope that here is where the Lord will make His sanctuary of His risen presence? That is what we're invited to see but only the Easter light could reveal that to us—that Easter faith.

The whole Gospel story ends on this parenthetical note. Remember as of yet they (meaning the disciples) did not understand Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead. This Easter Gospel story, Jesus rose from that dark tomb to show himself as our risen Lord and Christ the King of all creation. If we look today at the rest of this story we can have great hope for the rest of the story of our life.

More and more as I reflect on the Easter story, I can easily believe that Jesus died and rose again and I believe that happened in the past. I can believe—I'm sure you can too—when we all die, we who live with the Lord shall rise with the Lord. I have no trouble believing in the past. I have no trouble believing in the future Easter event. What I have trouble with is believing in the present moment that God could raise up this situation in which I'm walking in the dark still; that God could take this broken person, or this tragedy, or calamity, or this trouble. I have trouble believing. Can God bring good from this? Can God raise me above my doubts and fears? This is what we are invited to believe.

This is what Easter offers to us. We need to look into the places that I would call our empty tombs. That is, those places of emptiness; those places where we're not experiencing fullness; where we're not really at peace; where we are—and I say it again—in the dark and not fully understanding what the purpose is of all this. Let me give you an example. One of the hard situations that I hear from so many people is how hard it is to grow old. Isn't that true? Our bodies grow weaker as our years grow longer and what's good about it? What's good about it?

I heard a person once say, someone I trust (he's a very holy man), he said, "I finally discovered that because my body is on the downward decline, I find I have more reason to pay attention to my inner spirit and that's on the upward swing." As my body declines, my spirit is lifted up. I'm spending more time in prayer and spending more attention on what matters most in life. I'm learning to unite myself more with Christ on the cross and give up myself for Christ. Does this make sense?

You see this movement of death and resurrection. You see it in other ways. All of us are blessed with crosses. All of us are facing hardships and sometimes it's just overwhelming and I find I'm overcome by it. All of us are blessed with weaknesses and sometimes it gets the best of us or makes the worst of us I might say. What's good about it? One of the great questions I like to ask is, "What is good about Good Friday?" Why do they call Good Friday good? We have to ask that. What's good about what we're suffering right now? You have to place yourself there.

Bishop Sheen said this so well and I want to amplify this message. He said, "Unless there is a Good Friday in our lives, there will never be an Easter Sunday." Isn't that great? "Unless there is a Good Friday in our lives, there will never be an Easter Sunday."

We have to be willing to go to Calvary if we want to share in His glory. We've got to be willing to sacrifice our life if we want to enjoy God's great and eternal life. Are you willing to make this holy exchange? It's very difficult. In your own mind and heart I welcome you, invite you, to that place in your life, that empty tomb in your home, that place of emptiness in your family, the hardships, defeats, agonies, sufferings you have to endure. Can you believe in that very place of hurt that Jesus will raise you up? Do you believe that?

Do you believe my friends that after your Good Friday there will be for you an Easter Sunday? Do you believe that after your little crucifixions and deaths you will experience your resurrection right here, right now, as well as in the hereafter? Do you believe it? This is our faith and it's why we can sing at the end of this gospel, *Halleluiah, Halleluiah*. Amen.