

Easter Sunday  
(Acts 10:34. 37-43 / John 20:1-9)  
01.04.2018

We cannot but admire Mary of Magdala's courage. In the Passion Narratives we saw how she stood by Jesus when most others had fled. We find her once again in this morning's gospel passage displaying such faithful and fearless love. Mary came to the tomb before anyone else would ever dare to do so. She was not afraid of being identified with Jesus – even after all the derision to which He was subjected, before all and sundry, in the days just passed.

I find it significant that today's resurrection gospel opens with the reminder that Mary's discovery of the empty tomb – and therefore of Christ having been raised from the dead – came about *when it was still dark*. Mary came to the tomb to be with Jesus at a time when she couldn't see everything clearly. Things were still obscure for her and yet Mary wanted to be present to the Lord in faith, hope and love.

I'm sure there is a lesson in there for us at this challenging time in the life of the Church – not least, in the life of our diocesan Church of Dromore. Things are still far from clear for us and yet the truth is that Christ has risen, Jesus is alive; the Lord is with us. He is with us in the here and now of the life of our wounded, suffering Church. I dare to say that perhaps Christ is with us more powerfully than He ever was before. Jesus is more wonderfully present to us, precisely because His Church has been humbled to the extent it has been. Our great God is especially close to the broken-hearted – all those who have been weakened through humiliation endured. Faithful to His promise to be with us always, even to the end of time, the Lord is with His Church of Dromore at this difficult time. He wants us to hear that no matter how terrible our past and how painful our present, we have a future – with Him! The Lord wants us to understand this. I believe that we are being called this morning not only to look forward to a future resurrection, but to experience Christ's Risen life here and now, with us in the present – even before the full light of day has had a chance to break forth for us. In the agonising death we are still living, in our grief and sorrow, already new life is emerging. If for Jesus death was the only way into the resurrection, can it be otherwise for us?

Where we meet her this morning Mary is undoubtedly still suffering feelings of pain and loss, sorrow and distress. I'm sure many of us can identify with her feelings, having experienced pain and loss, sorrow and distress in our own lives, at different times and through various circumstances – some of us may well be experiencing such feelings right now. Evidently, Mary was far from starry-eyed at the stage where we meet her this morning in the story of her walk with Christ. The tragic events of the previous days would have served to completely shatter any starry-eyed idealism left over from more glorious days of the past. Having seen things played out so brutally before her eyes there was no room her heart for denial. Her hopes of some easy way through for Jesus had been shattered. The One she came looking for had died. His death had been an ignominious one. He was subjected to that most accursed of deaths: death upon a cross. Mary came to minister to His dead body which had been so harshly treated – battered and bruised – before being buried rapidly, without time for all the customary signs of reverence ordinarily given to the dead. I think it fair to say that Mary came to the tomb as stripped of her illusions as she had witnessed Christ stripped of His dignity when His garments had been removed in previous days. Mysteriously, it is here, in this circumstance of utter poverty and shame, in what is still a period of darkness, that Mary undergoes the great enlightenment she experienced on that first Easter morn.

Mary's enlightenment was the fruit of her faith, hope and love lived in darkness. So often our own experience rejoins that of Mary: it is in the darkness that we are called to see the light of our lives arise. Thomas Merton reminds us at one point in his writings: *The only thing faith and hope do not give us is the clear vision of Him whom we possess.* He goes on to say: *We are united to Him in darkness, because we have to hope.* (In passing, let me remind you that we associate not only darkness with Mary of Magdala, but hope as well. The Easter Sequence – the *Victimae Paschali laudes* – has her announce: *Christ my hope has risen!*) Merton's insights, which I have referred to, are certainly worth pondering at this time when as a local Church we have been plunged into darkness – given the terribly sombre happenings of the past which have come back to haunt us in the present. It is vital that we recall Merton's claim: *We are united with Him (with Christ) in (our present) darkness because we have hope.* There is little doubt in my mind that Merton's spiritual intuition in regard to the place of darkness in our discovery of the One who is in Himself *the Light of the world* came to him through his faithful meditation upon God's Word contained in Sacred Scripture. I can imagine how certain texts read in the liturgy and in *lectio divina* would have halted Merton's attention, as they should do ours. I think of what we read in Hebrews about faith and hope: *What is faith? It is the confident assurance that something we want is going to happen. It is the certainty that what we hope for is waiting for us, even though we cannot see it up ahead... Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.* In Romans we are assured that not seeing clearly in the present should not so frighten us as to rob us of all confidence: *Hope that is seen is not hope... We hope for what we do not yet see... We must keep trusting God for what has not happened yet, waiting patiently and confidently.* We cannot speak of faith and hope without being led to consider the central place of love in the trilogy. It is precisely when speaking of love – in 1 Corinthians 13 – having told us: *Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things,* that Paul goes on to remind us how here and now: *We see in a mirror only dimly, but later on we will see face to face. Now we know only in part; but the time will come when we will fully understand.* If we cannot speak of faith and hope without mentioning love, we certainly cannot think of Mary Magdalene, the great Resurrection Witness, *the Apostle to the Apostles,* without seeing how all three theological virtues were manifested in her life – precisely in and through the experience of darkness in her life journey. It was in and through darkness that she came to faith, hope and love. Just as darkness was a necessary part of Mary of Magdala's whole growth process – and not least at the heart of her encounter with the Risen Lord – so it often will be part of our spiritual itinerary, helping us grow in the Christian life.

At this point let me return to Thomas Merton's writings. His testimony in all this is precious. He articulates for us what we so often experience, but can find it hard to express: *Remaining in His darkness has fed me and made me grow.* The darkness made him grow! This is already a rule in the natural world. Think of the hidden growth that takes place in the darkness of the earth or again in the darkness of the womb. What applies in the natural world can be applied to the spiritual life. Let me dare to suggest that it can be applied to our experience as Church right now. In and through our present darkness we are being called to consent to growth – not without pain and travail, admittedly. There is always a degree of pain involved in growing – suffering and pain and even death! We have to die to our former way of being if we are to enter into the new life to which we are being called right now. This is the key message of the Paschal Mysteries which we are celebrating – and which we are called to live! Just as when we entered this church last night seeing little – having to make our way to our places in the church in the dark – so right now we have all to find and truly hold our place in the Church (not the building, but the *Living Body of Christ*), still not seeing everything clearly, but sure and certain, that a new dawn will rise and we will be led to see everything better, more clearly, with the passage of time. Right now our vision of God is obscure, we are still in the

darkness, we are still in the night to a certain degree, but let's dare to see the present time as the very early hour of a bright new day which rises for our Local Church, as for all God's People right across the world. A new light will rise – it is rising, it has already risen.

The time will come for us when we will see again the One for whom our heart longs, just as Mary of Magdala did in the Easter Garden. Our Christian tradition has long regarded that woman of the Song of Songs who went in search of her loved one as a *type* of Mary of Magdala in the Easter Garden. Mary sought out the body of Jesus to venerate it in the still dim light of the first Easter morn – at a time when night had not yet given way to day. Verses from the Song of Solomon come to mind: *In the night I sought Him whom my soul loves, I sought him, but found him not; I called him, but he gave no answer. I will rise and go about the city in the streets and in the squares; I will seek him whom my soul loves.* We are called to have Mary's determination at this challenging time. We are called to exercise nothing less than a naked faith at this difficult period. We have been stripped totally of any illusions we still had; we could even say of all human hope and trust. Our only hope at this point in time – the One in whom we are called to trust when none else can be trusted – is the One whom Mary hails and whom we are invited to recognise as our hope: *Spes mea... my hope!* This is none other than the Crucified One, the One humiliated and shamed, who was raised from the dead by the power of God's love. *The darkness was not dark for Him.* He died at a time when *deep darkness covered the entire earth.* His interior sentiment at that moment could not have been more sombre. He cried out in distress: *My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?* What dereliction! He was not afraid to descend further still for love of us. He descended into the very depths of hell – the ultimate dark place. The story didn't end there, however. Jesus came forth from that place robed in light. As the psalmist sings: *In His light, we see light. Yes, in the darkness we see light.*

Like Mary of Magdala we are being called this morning to courageously *get out there* – to the streets and the squares, like the woman in love in the *Song of Songs*... We are being called to make our way about still in the dark perhaps, but nonetheless – indeed, all the more – convinced that have a mission to proclaim Christ to be alive and with us in our Galilee, the place where we live our daily lives. Mary received her mission when the apostles were failing to fulfil the sacred duty confided to them. She was empowered by God's grace – even in the darkness – to become a witness to Christ's resurrection when the apostles were not living up to their vocation. What an apostle is called to be is a witness to the resurrection. It is not for nothing that we hail Mary of Magdala as *the apostle to the apostles.* She was the apostles' apostle when they lost their faith in God and in themselves. May Mary's example inspire and strengthen us. May we be renewed in our Christian vocation this morning. May we engage anew with our apostolate (and we all have one!) whatever it may be.