

Easter Sunday
(Acts 10:34.37-43 / John 20:1-9)
27.03.2016

While it was still dark Mary Magdalene came to the tomb. What Mary found was an empty sepulchre. The One she sought was not where she thought He would be. Darkness and emptiness were all that this heart-broken woman found. What Mary was experiencing – darkness, emptiness, absence, loss – are things not unknown to us. Yes, it also happens for us – as it happened for Mary of Magdala – that we do not find Christ where we expected to find Him and certainly not in the state we expected to find Him in. Jesus is not always to be found in the place where we thought we would be able to connect with Him, nor is He always encountered in the way by which we imagined.

When we come up against what Mary experienced on the first Easter morn; when we encounter deep darkness and real emptiness; when we are confronted with loss and pain in our lives; when anguish and distress take hold of our hearts and maintain a grip us; when we feel threatened, overcome with fear, submerged, drowned in sorrow, and, when the Lord is apparently absent, is it not the case that we are led to suffer all the more when we turn to places where we thought we would find Christ only to discover He is no longer there?

How often I have heard people who are going through a time of desolation, spiritual darkness, depression, loss and mourning, say to me: *I used to know what I could do, where I could go to connect with Christ, I no longer know where Jesus is in my life. Indeed, I wonder if He is to be found anywhere at all.*

The great consoling message of today's gospel passage – albeit a disconcerting one and one that we find hard to accept – is that **it is precisely in the darkness, in the seeming emptiness of our lives, that we can, and actually do, experience the mystery of Christ's resurrection.**

It was as Mary wept at the tomb that she discovered Jesus was alive. It is often as we weep in sorrow and distress that we discover that Christ lives in us. In moments of death, we become aware that *the Living One* is with us, ready to offer us consolation and hope.

In a strange way, the One who is *the Light which has come into the world* is best seen to shine forth in all His splendour when we behold Him from a place of darkness. The darkness into which we sometimes find ourselves plunged can make Christ's resplendent light shine forth all the more gloriously. The One who is plenitude of being, the One in whom all things are accomplished, the One who is our fulfilment, needs to find an empty space within us if He is to inhabit our lives and make His presence felt in our hearts.

What we discover when we go searching for Jesus where He is not to be found, is that He has been waiting for us where we so often fail to be: with ourselves. Christ is with us; He lives within us. So often we are looking for the Lord outside ourselves and all the while He is longing for us, waiting for us, hoping that we will discover His presence within our hearts.

We can hear this message over and over again, we can even repeat it with monotonous regularity for the benefit of others, and yet still fail to recognise its truth for our own lives.

The message of Easter is clear: **Christ our Light lives. Christ lives within us.**

The empty tomb at the heart of the resurrection story makes the point that Christ manifests His resurrection in a dark and empty space which is symbolic of that desolation and loneliness we all sometimes experience in the very depths of our hearts.

Christ lives within us!

As the great Saint Augustine reminds us: *the Risen Christ is more intimate with us than we are with ourselves.* One spiritual writer puts things well when he says: *The dark riddle of our lives is illuminated by the light of the Risen Jesus.* If only we could fathom and appreciate the wonderful truth Augustine shares with us. If only we could see that there is marvellous insight in that spiritual

writer's remark about the dark riddle of our lives being illuminated by the Risen Christ!

Why is it that we so often fail to grasp these truths? Why is it that we resist them to the extent we do? Is it a case of none being as blind as those who do not want to see? Or could it not be that the light sometimes shines so brightly that it can on occasion blind us?

It is the way of our God to reveal Himself as *the visible invisible*, to introduce a thought developed by the Jewish philosopher, Levinas. The great St Thomas Aquinas reminds us, for his part, that the surest way to know God is as '*tamquam ignotum*', as *utterly unknowable*.

It is as if the Lord dares us to believe in Him without seeing Him. In His resurrection appearance to Thomas in the Upper Room, on the evening of the first day of the week (at a time when darkness has once again fallen that yet again Jesus shows Himself to be there), Christ says: *You are happy and you believe because you can see me. Happier still are those who believe without seeing.*

Is it not our experience that it is often when things are at sombre and even at their worst that the best comes out in people's lives?

Just about a fortnight ago I heard a reporter make this comment on a secular chat show on the radio. I was driving across the country, trying to stay awake, I put on the car radio and I heard someone reporting from Killarney about a terrible incident that had involved the brutal death of a baby. The reporter remarked: *As is so often the case before such terrible tragedies and horror stories, the very best is brought out in people.* He spoke of how the local Irish and Polish communities had gathered around and helped very generously, doing all they could to be of comfort and support to a grieving and totally distraught mother and her family who had come from Poland to be with her. These people had organised themselves to finance the return of the baby's body for burial in Poland. The love they displayed, the proximity they manifested to this family who were suffering excruciating pain along with the practical help they offered were signs of the loving presence of the Risen Lord at work in this community, whether or not the people involved were motivated by Christian motives is really immaterial. All these folk were there in a most terrible hour, ready to bring comfort and give support. They were not afraid to go to a place of suffering to show love. We saw another reflection of the same sort of thing last week on the BBC News Page when a woman from a Loyalist estate in Derry dared to cross a separating barrier to attend morning Eucharist in the parish church of the family tragically bereaved in the terrible accident of the previous Sunday in Buncrana. She explained to her interviewer that she came there to show her compassion and that of her community. In this time of sorrow and distress, it was important to display solidarity: religious difference and political divergence were not her first thought in a case like this, but rather compassion and solidarity. The people I have referred to dared to do as Jesus did when He rose from the dead; for, we are told that Christ's first port of call was to descend into hell. It is surely significant that the icon of the resurrection actually depicts the Risen Lord to be in hell, pulling forth, freeing, wounded Adam and Eve, thus releasing broken and captive humanity held bound in the grips of death's hold.

The fullness of Christ's risen life is often made manifest in moments of great desolation, suffering, loss, excruciating pain, abandonment and loneliness. It is the Risen Christ's way to draw close to us when we are feeling most fragile, vulnerable and alone; when our life is *a living hell*. It is often Jesus' way to make us aware of His presence in manners that catch us off-guard and totally surprise us. Jesus frequently shows Himself to us in situations where we might think He just could not be present and sometimes through people in whom we would have never expected to find Him.

The Risen Christ makes Himself all the more manifest in our lives to the extent that we engage ourselves to live in a conscious awareness of His presence, daring to believe in His promise to be with us always. Yes, always! Through thick and thin!
What grace flows from the awareness to which we are called!

Etty Hillesum, the Dutch Jewess who died in Auschwitz on November 3, 1943, wrote of the vital importance of not giving way to despair. She reflected upon how *the night and darkness give way to the light of morning*.

As Christians listening to today's resurrection Gospel which speaks of Mary coming to the tomb *when it was still dark, before the sun had fully risen*, may we be graced to espouse Etty Hillesum's insight and see it in Christian terms. May we understand its fulfilment in the light of the first Easter morning and the rising Son (S-O-N), the Risen Christ, *the bright morning star*. Like Etty Hillesum and so many others, like countless people of all faiths and traditions, may we be led to hold firm in hope, even in the worst circumstances of despair. May we find our freedom and strength where Christians are called to find it: in what one man has called *a deliberate awareness of the present risenness of Jesus*.

In our chant this morning we heard Mary of Magdala share her experience on the first Easter morn. To the question I posed in chant: *Tell us Mary what you saw along the way*, the cantors gave Mary's response that she had seen that *Christ her hope had risen*.

The French poet Charles Peguy reminds us that this *hope comes to us each day to greet us with a simple bonjour!*

Amen!