



Easter Vigil 2018

(Mark 16:1-7)

31.03.2018

*Baptism & First Holy Communion of Hope Ita*

I trust the rest of you won't mind too much if I speak in a special way to one person in the congregation. I am going to address my words in a particular way to a wonderful little girl of six years of age who is about to be born again in the waters of baptism during our Easter Vigil. Her name is Hope.

I'll try to be brief with my words since this is a long night for Hope and tomorrow morning she will probably want to get up early to eat her Easter eggs.

After we read the gospel, Hope, it is always good to think a little bit about a line or two from the passage which has been read, because usually God has a special message for us in the text we've heard – especially when it has been proclaimed in church.

It can also be good for us to ask a question after listening to the gospel passage so as to come to a better understanding of its meaning. Tonight we will adopt a *two for the price of one* approach. We'll think about a few lines that contain a question within them.

We heard in the gospel: *The women had been saying to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?' But when they looked they could see that the stone – which was very big – had already been rolled back.*

Talk of the *very big stone* set me thinking.

I thought of a very big stone which you may have already seen yourself at the tip-top of Kilbroney Park: *Cloughmore* (from the Irish *Chloch Mhor*) – what we call locally *The Big Stone*. That big stone is a huge granite boulder perched on the top of the mountain called *Slieve Martin*, overlooking Carlingford Lough. Do you have any idea how much it weighs? Its weight is calculated to be about 50 tonnes. Now that's a lot. It is so heavy that even if all of us who are in this church were to join forces in an attempt to roll the big stone down the hill we just couldn't do it. But, there is a legend that one giant man Fionn mac Cumhaill (Finn McCool) threw the stone all by himself from the Cooley Peninsula on the other side of the Lough and it landed on the top of the mountain never to move again. When I was about your age my dad told me that story – along with other Fionn mac Cumhaill stories. I used to think my dad made up these Fionn mac Cumhaill stories all by himself, but later on I discovered that the legends he shared with me had been handed down to him from people who had gone before him – his daddy and his daddy's daddy and so forth... If I'm able to tell you the Fionn mac Cumhaill story tonight this is because all these successive generations of people handed down the Fionn mac Cumhaill stories over the centuries.

Now when I was around the same age, and even younger, I was told lots of other stories – even greater stories than those concerning Fionn mac Cumhaill. These were stories about Jesus and they were taken from what we call the gospels. The gospels are filled with wonderful good news stories.

They tell us about all the good things Jesus did and said. All the different Jesus stories we read in the gospels make the same fundamental point. They all tell us how much God loves us and how much He cares for us. They also tell us how much He wants us to know, love and serve Him – and that we should do that by knowing, loving and serving other people: our families (for you... your mum and your big sisters – Grace and Joy), our friends, people all around us... even those we can find it hard to love sometimes... people we might even think of as our enemies.

At Easter we are led to think in a special way about the strength of God's love for us. The strength of God's love for us is hinted at by the mention of that big stone which He removed from the entrance of Jesus' tomb. God had to be strong to move the very big stone. His strength came from the love He had for Jesus... and for us. God moved the stone from Jesus' tomb for the women who couldn't have moved it themselves. He moved it, not just for those women; He moved it for us too!

It wasn't just 2,000 years ago (the length of time since Jesus lived on earth) that God did something extraordinary for us by raising Jesus from the dead. It is each and every day that He does great things for all of us – showing us His love through all the good things that happen in our lives and helping us get through the more difficult things that happen along the way.

God is doing something great, something really wonderful, for all of us who are here tonight and who will see you being baptised. By your baptism God is reminding us of our baptism. He is reminding all of us that, just like you, we are reborn in Christ; given rebirth and made new. Those of us who are much older than you are find ourselves being made young again tonight. Some of us are thirty or forty or fifty or sixty years of age... and some are older still... and yet all of us – just like you – become like newborn babes as we remember the grace of our baptism. You see God is forever making each one of us into *a new creation*.

God is also constantly doing things for us that we just can't do for ourselves when we rely on our own strength alone – like rolling away that very big stone which He took care of for the women in the gospel. God is forever helping women like your mum to cope with the hard things that happen and are part of life... things like the loss of your dear dad who is in heaven looking down upon you with all the saints as you are baptised tonight. I'm sure one of the greatest things God has ever done for your mum was to give her a beautiful daughter like you – and to have given her your wonderful big sisters (Grace and Joy) as well. You are all three great gifts in her life: gifts which are the fruit of the love your mum and dad shared.

Just as your parents loved you into being, in the same way tonight God loves all of us into *a new way of being* with you.

Just as you brought great joy to your mum when you were born (just as you continually bring great joy to her, day after day... and not only to her, but to so many, including all of us who are here tonight for your Baptism and First Holy Communion) so, too you bring joy to God's heart by becoming His graced child, His beloved daughter in this celebration.

Strange as this might sound, in being reborn through baptism – becoming like a newborn baby all over again tonight – you also grow up and become a disciple with a special mission through the sacrament you receive. Just like those women in the resurrection gospels you have for mission to announce to us that Christ is Risen and is alive. Because of you we are all reborn in hope – your name (Hope)! There's a play on words in there for the adults in the congregation. I trust that all of us *big ones* who are here tonight will be reborn in our *holy hope* in Christ because of what we see happening for you!

At the end of our celebration tonight I am going to get you to help me send the people home with the same message the women were given for the disciples on the first Easter morning: *It is in Galilee that you will see Him*. It is that it is in Galilee that they and that we are all called to encounter the Risen Christ. Galilee is the place where the disciples came from. The message is that we are all called to encounter Christ in the place from whence we have come here tonight and to which we will return. We can find Jesus in all sorts of places. The people of Rostrevor are called to

find him there. Tomorrow some of the inhabitants of our village will climb to the *Big Stone* to roll their Easter eggs. If people roll Easter eggs they do so as a reminder of the heavy stone rolled back from the entrance of Jesus' tomb.

Can I say a little word specifically to you the adults who are here tonight?

You've probably already heard much of what I've got to say to you as you listened in on what I said specifically to Hope.

What I'd want to tell you tonight is that you should bring away from this place tonight the assurance that the Lord wishes to remove from the entrance of all your tombs those big stones you cannot move for yourselves. There are things we simply cannot do trusting on your own strength alone, but God can and will do them for us. It is good for us to be reminded of the Apostle Paul's teaching tonight: *The Lord comes to help us in our weakness*. God moves the stones which block our hearts and keep us locked into places of darkness. The icon of the resurrection we welcomed solemnly into our midst depicts for us how Christ has broken the gates of hell. The Risen Lord calls us out of those shadowy regions of our hearts wherein we take false refuge; He wants to liberate us from our hurts, our fears, our disappointments, our guilt, our shame... all that binds and imprisons us. He wants to give us fresh hope especially at this challenging time in the life of our Local Church.

When we hold the lighted candle in hand, coming forth to be sprinkled with the blessed water as a reminder of our own baptism, may we experience something of the new birth we will witness little Hope live tonight. As I said, may we be reborn in hope... in the grace of *holy hope* so dear to our community here at Holy Cross Monastery – a grace of which the Scriptures speak to us so eloquently.

May our song at the heart of this night be that of Mary of Magdala: *Christ our hope is risen*. By virtue of our baptism He lives in us. Alleluia!