

Easter Sunday (A)
(Acts 10:34.37-43 / John 20:1-9)
12.04.2020

The Resurrection Gospel of Easter Day begins in the darkness. *It was still dark when Mary of Magdala came to the tomb on the first day of the week.* The day of the Lord's new Creation began in darkness, just as the First Creation Story began in darkness before God declared: *Let there be light.*

Mary came to do for Jesus what she hadn't been able to do just after His brutal death and rushed burial. She returned to the tomb hoping to be able to minister the last loving rites that were customary among the Jews upon her Beloved Master's dead body. In this way, Mary wanted to bid a dignified *adieu* to Jesus; the dignified *adieu* to the Master that the circumstances of His death had rendered impossible. In a culture such as our own, here in Ireland, we can understand Mary's desire to do the right thing for her deceased loved one. In the present situation of Covid19 we cannot but think of so many people who have been, are being, and will yet be, deprived of the consolation of traditional funeral rites.

What a terrible shock and what an awful feeling of emptiness must have struck Mary when she discovered the body of Jesus was not there where she had expected to find it. Christ's body was gone; the sepulchre was empty. Mary did not immediately think in terms of the promise of resurrection. All she could feel at that moment was an even greater sense of dismay, an even deeper level of sadness. She must have been at a total loss.

Let's dare to explore a little further the sentiment of stupor and shock that must have invaded Mary's heart. I believe it is important that we do so on this Easter morning – especially this year – for, we would do no justice to the Easter experience many are making right now in their lives, or have yet to make, by just skipping over Mary's sense of terrible loss, her acute grief. If we were to pretend that loss was not part of the Easter story, how could we ever make sense out of the *pascha* many people are being led to experience at this time in our world which is so deeply afflicted by Covid19?

Undoubtedly, Easter is a day of great joy. We are called to *rejoice and be glad in the day that the Lord has made.* We are called to celebrate Christ's victory over death with all our heart, but the victory over death that the Lord won does not eclipse the battle He had to contend with on the way. This is also true when it comes to the spiritual combat we all have to endure if we are to make an authentic experience of the resurrection in our lives.

Loss is part of the human existence. Not just at the time of the coronavirus virus, but all times! What sense can we give to our losses?

Every experience of the emergence of new life, all the successive passages of growth in our lives, will be marked by certain losses. If we ignore these losses, or if we downplay or deny their impact upon us, we won't do ourselves any favour. We can actually hinder ourselves from experiencing the new thing the Lord wants to reveal to us; the present gift He now wants to give us; the renewal of life He wants to bring about within us.

This is also true when it comes to the loss of those we mourn. There is no other way to enter into fullness of life than the obligatory passage through the doorway of death.

Jesus spoke in His Farewell Discourse of the coming of *the Spirit of Truth.* Part of the Spirit of Truth's mission is to enter into the very depths of our being in order to dissolve and dissipate all our false illusions. However painful it may be for us to accept this, the truth is

that we all carry many illusions in our hearts about God, about other people or even ourself. All these illusions must be shattered if we are to come to know the True God; to know people as they really are; and to know our own true self in a fully mature way. Only once we have cast our illusions aside will we come to know, and be able to relate to, the True God, whom Jesus has revealed to us; and to relate to others as we should do, for who and what they are and who and what they are not – rather than as it pleases us to dream they should be.

The passages I am talking about here are not easy ones to live through. If we have lived through such a *pascha*, such a letting go, in our lives, then we will know just how challenging it was to do so. When we are going through the process I am describing here, it can appear to us that we are losing everything that has helped sustain us hitherto – including Christ Himself! We must remember that we are called *to see Christ as He really is*. (That is a phrase we find both in Sacred Scripture and in the Church's liturgy.) In the meantime we must let go of our false notions about the Lord. To come to that point usually takes time! It isn't easy to find oneself stripped of one's illusions; stripped of what has been of so much consolation to us in the past – even if it was only a false comfort we were clinging to. When this happens we can find ourselves plunged into deep sadness; we can be left feeling truly forlorn and perhaps even somewhat distressed.

In the Gospel account read this morning, Mary runs to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, to tell them: *They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don't know where they have put Him*. Her initial understanding of what has happened is repeated anew a little later on in John 20 when she meets with the Risen Lord Himself, whom she mistakes, at first, to be the gardener. When Jesus comes to encounter a deeply distressed Mary, she is overcome with grief and is weeping abundant tears. She is totally overwhelmed. The Risen One asks her what it is that is upsetting her. She replies in a very personal and poignant manner: *They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid Him*. What she expresses there is her total bewilderment.

Are there not times in all our lives when we are left stunned, shattered, completely at a loss, bewildered, by events that overtake us; things that we just cannot understand? The explanations proffered by well-meaning people – their words which assure us that the Lord is at work in what we are going through and wants to help us grow by what we are experiencing – may well make sense, but they rarely make us feel better in the immediate. We are still left for a while where Mary is shown to have started the first Easter Day: in shadowland, in the pre-dawn darkness which covers the earth until the full rising of the sun descends upon it and its inhabitants and bathes all in its light.

The darkness in which Mary found herself was not the deep darkness of the night. It is qualified for us as *the darkness of the early morning*. Dawn is about to rise.

Likewise, for us, where we are today, a new day is promised to us. We are called to hope for its appearance; to long for its rising. Our hope for this new day's arrival is not to be seen in terms of just wishful thinking. That would only cheapen our expectation. Hope does not come cheap. Dom Emmanuel Andre taught our forefathers in monastic life at Mesnil Saint Loup that *hope is a harsh virtue*. It is a costly grace! At Bec, Abbot Paul Grammont frequently made the same point in his teaching, reminding us, in line with what Paul wrote in his Letter to the Romans chapter 5 that holy hope is born of suffering endured with patience. Thomas Merton for his part has written: *Supernatural hope strips us of all things. We do not hope for what we have. Therefore, to live in hope is to live in poverty, having nothing*. A little further on in the same text (his book *No Man Is An Island*), Merton goes on to say: [Nonetheless] *By hope we possess God without feeling His presence. We are united to Him in darkness*. (I underscore the words: without feeling His presence... and in darkness)

Mary of Magdala had to experience the complete sense of loss she felt in the garden when she discovered the empty tomb in order to be able to know the new relationship with Jesus to which she was being called. The same was true for Peter and for John, and, later on, for all the disciples. They all had to stop clinging to Jesus' former mode of being present to them, in order to enter into a new way of relating to Him as their Risen Lord.

It was to set the disciples free that Jesus eluded them where they thought they would find Him.

The disciples could have been tempted to make of the tomb of Jesus a hero's shrine in a way that held Him encapsulated and even imprisoned Him therein. They might have been tempted to make of Jesus' place of burial – a work of human hands, hewn from a rock – a focus of idolatrous worship.

The words Mary relayed to Peter and to the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, were so important. They are at the heart of the Easter message. *He is not where He was laid.* Effectively, Jesus was no longer there where the disciples thought they would find Him. While Mary did not yet know where Jesus was, along with Peter and John and so many others who were graced to encounter Him, she was to come to realise that in His risen life, He was now to be found everywhere!

We must always be wary of our desire to hold the Lord in our grasp; to think of Him as being located only in certain places or reduced to certain modes of presence to us. We must be on our guard to want hold the Lord captive in any way. We must be vigilant around all our certainties that this is where the Lord will be found. Even what, at first, may appear to us as a worthy desire to enshrine His divine glory in a place made with human hands is to be shunned. Think of the warning God gave at the time of the building of the Temple of Jerusalem.

The empty tomb cries out to us this morning. Its dead silence resounds like thunder. *He is not here!* The vacant sepulchre puts us on our guard against our vain attempts to lay hands upon the Lord of life in a way that would reduce Him to an idol we can control. The Lord won't have this. He will always manage to escape the places, the ideas, the notions in which we try to contain or confine Him.

To the questions that arise in our hearts at this time – *Where are You, Lord? Where, or rather, how can we find You?* – the answer that comes to us: *Enter into my empty tomb to see in it the place of your growth. Understand what nature itself shows you. Think of the rules of the natural life all around you. Most of the growth needed to root things and people takes place in the darkness. Think of the darkness of the earth below the top soil. Think of the darkness of the womb in which you were formed and took shape. So, it is in the spiritual life as well. Real growth in life takes place in spiritual darkness. Do not be afraid to find yourself therein.* Again, an insight of Thomas Merton comes to mind – and this comes from his book *The Sign of Jonas*. Merton testifies therein: *Remaining in His darkness has fed me and made me grow.*

These dark days we are living through are undoubtedly proving to be for many of us a very challenging experience. Perhaps with time we may come to see them as days of extraordinary grace; days of great spiritual growth. There have been, there are, there will still be many people terrible losses. Just to hear that word *loss* makes a shudder run down our spine. As I echo it, lines from the writings of Paul come to mind. The lines I think of bring together the pain of loss and the power of resurrection, stressing their inter-relatedness. Writing to the Philippians, Paul declares: *For His sake, I have suffered the loss of all things and count this*

as rubbish, in order that I may know Christ and be found in Him (may find myself in Him!), knowing the power of His resurrection.

This was what Mary of Magdala experienced – at least began to experience – on that first Easter morning. It is an experience we are called to enter into on this Easter Day. With our losses, properly lived, comes freedom. Once again, Merton captures the idea of freedom through loss, when he writes: *Only when we are able to let go of everything within us, all desire to see, to know, to taste, to experience the presence of God, do we truly become able to experience that presence with the overwhelming conviction and reality that revolutionise our entire inner life.*

Jesus' absence from the whole of this morning's Resurrection Gospel is really striking. Note, His presence is not mentioned even once. It is most significant that on this day when we proclaim the faith of the whole Church that Jesus is risen from the dead, He is not to be seen in the garden.

The word the Risen Lord wants us to hear and take away from this celebration this morning is captured in lines penned many centuries ago by an anonymous scribe – and this is where we are meant to find Him: *My tomb is your heart, and there I am not dead, but resting, and alive for all eternity!*