

Easter Day (B)  
(Acts 10:34.37-43 / John 20:1-9)  
04.04.2021

There is a saying with which we are all familiar: *Seeing is believing*. As Christians we recall from the Gospel account of Jesus' appearance to the Apostles in the Upper Room how Thomas declared: *Unless I can see Him with my own eyes and touch Him with my own hands, I refuse to believe*. Reading today's resurrection account, it strikes me that we find a very different reaction on behalf of the Beloved Disciple. It is precisely because the Beloved Disciple did not see Jesus's body that he believed that Christ is risen. In the tomb the only thing to be seen was the linen cloths. There is no body there. As Peter and John stood in the empty tomb, the Beloved Disciple, *seeing that the grave was empty believed there and then*. This Gospel scene has me think of a responsory we sing in our repertoire of chants here at the abbey: *Without seeing Him we believe. Without knowing Him we believe. Alleluia!* That is what real faith is all about!

I expect that many people may be finding it hard to see Jesus at the present time, and, not seeing Him, they can find it hard to believe.

In today's world, we do not have many empty tombs. Indeed, there are many recently opened and recently filled graves with corpses in them. We are aware of the high death rate endured right across the world due to the present pandemic. The death toll to the virus rises each and every day. Nearly three million people have died from the illness so far. Family members, friends or neighbours have died (and not only to Covid, but of others causes too) and many of us have been deprived of the comfort of accompanying them at the end, unable to mark their passing with the usual rites associated with passage from this life. The fact that we were unable to pose the usual gestures associated with the liturgical celebrations of the Easter Triduum brings home to us to what extent our world is held the grips of the present pandemic. (A simple example of that this morning is the fact that we could not process in through the central aisle of the church building, as we would have done normally on Easter Day.) The Roll out of the vaccination programme may be offering us some comfort, but we are not out of the woods yet. Or, to use an image that comes to me from this morning's Gospel passage, we are still a little before full daylight – it is still dark. The full brightness of the dawn's sun has yet to emerge.

We can surely identify with Mary of Magdala's grief and the questioning that stemmed from it as she made her way to the tomb – and even when, arriving there, she found it empty. We are told that *Mary questioned where Jesus was to be found*. She wondered if His body had been stolen. She felt deprived of the consolation she considered she would have found in tending to His body – even after death. She had been used to regular contact with the Master. Her whole life revolved around Jesus. Now that was gone. He was gone! With her discovery in the Garden, even the comfort of having a grave to go to was taken away from her. We can understand Mary's sorrow, the pain she felt deep within her heart.

Many Christians speak of their pain not to be able to gather with the Body of Christ, their Church community, as they would like to be able to this morning. There are those who were used to attending daily Eucharist. Their life revolved around this daily encounter with the Lord and the community of believers with whom they celebrated the Sacrament. I am sure, like me, you will have heard those who have declared that it has felt to them as if this comfort has been stolen from them. While understanding their regrets in this regard, we must be careful not to give into the temptation of thinking that Christ has been or ever will be taken from us because of the present restrictions that are in place – or for any other reason.

Admittedly these have hindered the normal flow of Church life for many people. Here in Northern Ireland, numbers allowed to attend our celebrations are limited – out of respect for and in a bid to preserve public health. In the Republic of Ireland, the measures have had to be even stricter, because of the greater health crisis in the State there. Congregational gatherings for the normal round of worship simply cannot take place in the Republic of Ireland today. We can understand the sadness many have felt because of this, but people must not allow themselves to be so totally overcome by the grievances they feel that they fail to grasp that the Risen Christ will manage to visit them in their own homes or wherever else they may be today. A tomb could not confine the Risen Lord at the first Easter. We should not think of Christ being confined only to our church buildings today. It is not only in a church building, or, even only, in a community of believers that Jesus can be encountered. In His present risen state, Jesus is everywhere present. His presence fills the whole universe. He is wherever we are, wherever we look... even though His presence is nowhere to be seen. That was the case when Peter and John stood in the empty tomb that first Easter morning. They could not see Jesus. They were in a space that was devoid of His physical presence, and yet, precisely there, in the emptiness, John, the Beloved Disciple, came to believe in Christ's resurrection and felt the blessing of peace that comes through faith in Jesus' risen life. No longer in the tomb. No longer there where the disciples were convinced they should find Him, Jesus is shown again and again in the resurrection Gospel accounts to draw alongside people where they were: be they making their way hurriedly along a garden path, or engaged in their employment (out fishing on the lake again), or walking the road in the evening light (turning their back on their fellow-disciples – heading out of Jerusalem towards Emmaus), or huddled together behind closed doors out of fear, in the heart of the city of Jerusalem. The Risen One made it clear to the women that they should tell the brothers that He would meet them in Galilee. It is there that they (the disciples) would see Him. In other words, in their normal place of habitation. Likewise, the Risen Lord meets us where we live, wherever we are.

How many times Christ has visited people where they were – visited us where we were – all these past months. I think of people who have been united to our community's daily round of worship through the webcam link. I think of so many others who have connected with other places in which the liturgy has been celebrated. I think also of those who have courageously prayed alone – without the support of the worshipping community. I think of those who have walked beaches or parks or the streets of our cities, their river-banks, their bridge crossings etc. Christ has been everywhere present to these folk. People have met the Risen Lord in so many places, under so many guises, in a variety of ways.

Christ has been particularly present to people through other persons – maybe just through the nod of a head or a smile that managed somehow to cheer and warm their hearts and give them courage as they pursued life's road, perhaps, on some days, feeling terribly alone. Christ has made Himself present to us by many simple means, such as a text message or a telephone call. Christ has been especially present in places of suffering and pain: in those who were suffering and in those who cared to them in their hour of need. Christ has been as really present in all the places I have alluded to as He is present to us as we gather here this morning in this church building to celebrate the Sacred Mysteries, to celebrate Eucharist.

It is not among the dead that we are to look for Jesus, but among the living. The angel declared: *Why look among the dead for One who is alive?* We are called to see Jesus in everyone we encounter; we are called to reach out to Him in each one, to serve each one in whatever way we can and, in so doing, to serve Christ in them. Likewise, when we are on the

receiving end of another's attention, we are called to see Jesus reaching out to us through those who are attentive to us.

To live in the Spirit of what I dare to call *present risen-ness* (using a term coined by an American spiritual writer I admire) is to live in an awareness that *the Living One* is with us and, above all, that He is within us. Christ lives! He lives within you. He lives within me. The Risen One makes His home in our hearts – not to be imprisoned therein, but to break forth from us, as He did from the tomb. He wants to radiate through us. He wants to emanate from us. He wants to share Himself with the whole world by our presence to it.

In today's Gospel scene much is made of Jesus' discarded grave clothes and that folded cloth that had been over Jesus' head. The fact that these clothes and the face covering were left in the empty tomb points to the fact that the Risen Jesus had found a new way of clothing Himself. He freely chose to be clothed in another way than that in which He had been wrapped. How is the Risen Lord clothed today? He is clothed in the flesh of our brothers and sisters. He is clothed in our flesh too. How important for us to see and believe this! The implication of this is clear. We are called to *put on Christ*, as the Apostle tells us. As Christian disciples we are meant to be *clothed in Christ*. We are to do as Christ did. Christ put on the apron of humility; He clothed His splendour in simplicity. We are called to live our lives humbly and simply in ways that allow Jesus to live in and shine through us; in ways that allow Jesus to be seen as living within us in today's world. What matters is not just our outer appearance, but our inner conformity to Christ-Jesus. To be truly *clothed in Christ* is to be *inhabited by, animated by, the same sentiments as were in Christ* – as Paul puts it when writing to the Philippians. It is to be *clothed in compassion, tender-hearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience and love*, as the Apostle reminded the Colossians.

May we strive to make Christ visible in this world – not by our playing at being Christians; not by playing at being Christlike, but by truly (and all the more truly, because unconsciously) being *like Christ*! Being *truly Christlike* is all about living as His servants: animated by what one translation of the Prayer of St Ephrem, which accompanied our community during the Lenten days, calls: living in *the spirit of wholeness of being, humble-mindedness, patience and love*.