

EASTER SUNDAY

Gospel: John 20:1-9

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

REFLECTION 1: CONQUERING THE POWER OF DEATH

How hard would it have been for the disciples to believe in the resurrection of Jesus? They saw his miraculous powers first hand. But John in today's Gospel (John 20: 1-9) tells us that the disciples did not understand that Jesus had to rise from the dead. The news from Mary Magdalene had come as a shock. Peter and the other disciples soon confirmed the empty tomb. The resurrection is a mystery we must grasp personally. Without Easter faith, we would not be here this morning proclaiming, 'Alleluia'.

The first Easter Sunday proclaimed by John is animated and quick moving. Everyone seems to be in a hurry on the morning of 'this day that the Lord has made'. No one ever loved Jesus as Mary Magdalene did. Whatever about her past, she was the first to come to the tomb, still weeping and confused. She finds the tomb open and empty and immediately fears that the body of Jesus has been removed. Grave robbers have come in the night and stolen the body? Jesus, she recalls, had been the victim of hatred and was that hatred now being extended to the tomb? So, she runs to tell the friends of the Holy One, who in times past had set her free. She might well have used the words of the Song of Songs, 'Have you seen him whom my heart loves?' (Song 3: 3)

So, Simon Peter and the 'disciple whom Jesus loved' (obviously John the Evangelist) rushes out towards the burial place. John, the younger, outpaces Peter and arrives first. But he halts, panting and out of breath. Courteously he waits for Peter to catch up and graciously allows Peter to enter first – 'the age of chivalry has not passed.' There in front of them lay the grave clothes, neatly folded as if the body of Jesus had simply evaporated out of them. Now it was clear that the body had not been stolen. But while Peter, not understanding, ponders to himself, the beloved disciple has already understood. In these abandoned and folded grave-cloths he reads the testimony of a definitive resurrection. Life now rules where death once reigned! John sees as only love can. He believes and he journeys into the fullness of meaning which is Jesus, living now and evermore, opening up for us the way to eternal life, raising us up and renewing our lives by the Spirit that is within us.

REFLECTION 2: ROLLING BACK THE STONE

As the women disciples made their way to Jesus' tomb on Easter morning they had one big problem – who would roll back the great stone that had been placed at the entrance to the tomb?

I knew a man who had a row with his father, as a result of which he hadn't spoken to his father for several years, even though they lived only a few miles apart. He was an only child and the mother had deserted the family. So now the father was living alone. His world would be getting smaller with each day that passed. He wasn't yet dead, but in a certain sense he was already in the tomb. We marvel at the way Jesus had the power to raise people from the dead and in a certain sense we can do the same. Take the son in our story, he had the power to roll away the stone from his father's tomb. With a word or a gesture, he could have set him free from his tomb of loneliness and despair. And in helping his father he would have helped himself as well.

The good news of Easter is that Jesus has triumphed over sin and evil – and so will we if we open our hearts to his Easter power. The good news of Easter is that every Good Friday in our lives can be turned into an Easter Sunday – nothing can deflect us anymore – not pain, not sorrow, not even death. Jesus will work a miracle in our lives, if we will open our hearts to his Easter message, 'the story of Easter is the story of God's wonderful window of divine surprise'.

The word 'resurrection' does not mean a restoration to one's previous life, as happened to Lazarus, the widow of Nain and Jarius' daughter. It is not resuscitation. It is something more; it means a great leap forward into a totally new life – something no human has yet experienced. In other words, the body of Jesus that rose on Easter Sunday was radically different from the body that was buried on Good Friday. St. Paul compares a body before and after resurrection to a seed and the plant that emerges from it. He says – 'when a body is buried, it is mortal, when raised it will be immortal.... when buried, it is a physical body but when raised it will be a spiritual body' (1 Cor: 15:42).

We too are destined for resurrection. We too are destined to share in an incredibly transformed life that Jesus enjoys in heaven. This is the good news of Easter and we don't have to wait until we die to share in the risen life of Jesus. We can begin now in this Mass, in this Easter celebration. That estranged son we mentioned had the chance of inviting his father and himself to a new life of mercy, hope and love. You will be glad to know that they did indeed become reconciled – they had taken away the stone that had kept them apart.