

EASTER SUNDAY GOSPEL

Gospel

John 20:1-9

He must rise from the dead

It was very early on the first day of the week and still dark, when Mary of Magdala came to the tomb. She saw that the stone had been moved away from the tomb and came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved. 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb' she said 'and we don't know where they have put him.'

So Peter set out with the other disciple to go to the tomb. They ran together, but the other disciple, running faster than Peter, reached the tomb first; he bent down and saw the linen cloths lying on the ground, but did not go in. Simon Peter who was following now came up, went right into the tomb, saw the linen cloths on the ground, and also the cloth that had been over his head; this was not with the linen cloths but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple who had reached the tomb first also went in; he saw and he believed. Till this moment they had failed to understand the teaching of scripture, that he must rise from the dead.

EASTER HOMILY 2020

Dear brothers and sisters in the Risen Christ, Happy Easter!

'What's happy about it?' many of you may justifiably say. With many people dying and others suffering, there appears to be little evidence of the Resurrection. Even if we are not affected physically, many of us may be financially. The economy, they say, could be heading for ruin. People are losing their jobs. Home schooling while trying to keep a job (online!) is trying people's patience. Tempers are fraying, marriages are under deeper strain. And, of course, just the cost of isolation upon people's mental health. It's not for nothing that the Church accepts the philosophical principle that man is a social animal. Even the most self-contained introvert will find aspects of this social isolation difficult at times.

And then there are the effects upon us too as a worshiping community of faith in the Risen Lord. Catholicism, of its very nature, is an incarnational religion. Christ became flesh for a reason: so that He could commune with us in a human, physical way, a way we would understand. Herein lies the whole point of the Church: the mystical continuation of Christ's incarnational presence amongst us. Herein, by extension, lies the whole point of her Sacraments and her liturgical celebrations. We need that human, incarnational contact with the Lord; we yearn for it. That is why we yearn to be at church to be in His Presence and receive His graces through the Sacraments.

It is natural for us, then, to be deeply saddened at the loss of our access to the Lord, for which all the many benefits and consolations of online technology can never be an adequate substitution.

Added to this, all the rich liturgical symbolism that we normally take so much for granted at this time of year has been undone: no adoration at the altar of repose on Holy Thursday – no spending 'just one hour' with the Lord in Gethsemane; no veneration of the cross on Good Friday – no one to accompany Him on His 'sorrowful journey'; no Liturgy of Light at the Easter Vigil – no one to 'exult and be glad, knowing an end to gloom and darkness'; and none of the joy of welcoming people into the Church through baptism and confirmation.

And as if to crown all our spiritual agonies with a metaphorical crown of thorns, we have this Gospel for Easter Sunday morning. Oh, how we too wish that, like Mary of Magdala, we could head to the tomb of our churches in the morning of Easter! What we would give to be able to run like Peter and John with joy to the place of the Resurrection! For that, dear friends, is precisely what our churches are: they are places of the Resurrection. They are where we celebrate the whole drama of the Mystery of Salvation: the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of the Lord. These mysteries of our faith are all made present in the most august Sacrifice of the Mass; and that is why we come.

And here we are, on Easter Day, with all our churches remaining shut; the public celebration of Mass made impossible by the knock-on effects of an invisible foe. They remain like closed tombs with the stone still firmly in place over the entrance. I think professor N.T. Wright made a salient observation in a recent article that the biblical tradition – and I would argue very Celtic tradition – in such circumstances is simply ... to lament!

And yet... and yet... for we who have faith, we know that, in spite of our trying circumstances, Christ has indeed risen from the dead; that death does not have the final say and nor are we afraid of it! Christ has destroyed the power of death forever and brings the hope of eternal life and the Resurrection of our mortal bodies. Yes, the disciples were probably driven to the edge of despair at the death of Jesus; but their despair turned to joy on the day of the Resurrection. And we too will 'run' with joy back to our churches at some point in the future, just like the apostles ran to the empty tomb. Granted, it has been a lot longer than three days already and how much longer we will have to wait is anybody's guess. But we will very much encounter the Risen Lord there upon our return. And if we lament somewhat in our hearts at this time, then good! Let us lament! Only a heart that loves can lament. It was precisely this same love of the Lord that motivated Mary of Magdala to head to the tomb so early. It was this love of the Lord that motivated the fraternal race between Peter and John to the tomb upon hearing that the Lord had arisen. Love of the Lord, in fact, is the hermeneutical key to all the Resurrection accounts in the Gospels.

In the end, that is what the Lord always desires and elicits from the hearts of His true disciples: love of Him. And if we are deprived of the Sacraments of His Church at this time, we know - because we love Him as our Divine Saviour - that the Lord is not bound by His own Sacraments. He freely desires to mediate His life and grace through them, but He is not, ultimately, bound by them. Love of the Lord and His love for us cannot, ultimately, be bound by anything. 'For I am certain of this: neither death nor life, no angel, no prince, nothing that exists, nothing still to come, not any power, or height or depth, nor any created thing, can ever come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom 8:38).

Tragic as this current situation is, let us remember this exultation of St Paul who, of all the apostles, was the greatest preacher of the Resurrection. Let us unite ourselves to the Lord in prayer at our own specific time in our own 'domestic churches', whether we find ourselves surrounded by family members or alone and let us pray. Follow the readings of Mass. Follow a streamed Mass online if you find that helpful. Tell the Lord that you love Him. Ask him to grant you the grace of knowing His love for you. And have gratitude in your hearts for His victory over sin and death and His promise of the Resurrection for those who remain faithful to Him. And let us pray also for those who are suffering at this time and for those who very bravely help them in our 'front line' services.

One final thing and a suggestion. Earlier, I referred to our own 'spiritual crown of thorns'. If you picked up on any sad pun between 'crown' and this time of 'corona', then you were right to do so. It was intended.

However, I have a suggestion for you all as a spiritual counterattack against the effects upon us from the Corona virus lockdown. And it is this. People often say that this is an unprecedented situation where we are unable to get to our churches and receive the Sacraments, but this is not true for us as Catholics. In this country, after the Reformation, Catholicism was outlawed and priests could be put to death for celebrating the rites of the Church. Many were martyred in England and Wales. We have our own solitary martyr, St John Ogilvie (of whom there is a stained glass window in the Our Lady altar area of St James'). But in Scotland, very small pockets of the Catholic faith remained – mainly in isolated, Gaidhlig-speaking areas of the Highlands and Islands. After the 1745 rebellion it became particularly difficult to practice the Catholic faith, even in secret.

And yet...there was one spiritual weapon that kept the faith alive. And that was the Rosary. In Gaidhlig, the name for the Rosary is 'Conair Mhoire'. Gaidhlig is my parents' native language and my mother reliably informs me that 'Conair Mhoire' means 'Mary's Crown'.

My suggestion, therefore, is that during the normal parish Mass times when I will be celebrating Mass (but only one Sunday 11am Mass), those who are able and willing meet up on Zoom and recite the Rosary together. We do not have live-stream facilities here but this, I feel, would be an effective way of making a spiritual counterattack with the use of Mary's Crown against the 'Crown' virus. As well as participants being spiritually united, there would be some time available afterwards to chat to each other. Everything is set up and good to go but I will make a separate post about this very soon. In the meantime, I would be very interested to hear if you would be willing and able to take part in this spiritual and social venture.

I shall therefore end as I began, for I meant it: Happy Easter! We are right to be happy. Please do find as much joy as you possibly can from celebrating this happy day. And as we would have 'heard' in the second reading from St Paul to the Colossians: 'Let your thoughts be on heavenly things, not on the things that are on the earth, because you have died, and now the life you have is hidden with Christ in God. But when Christ is revealed – and he is your life – you too will be revealed in all your glory with him'. (Col 3: 2-4).

Every blessing in the Risen Lord,
Fr Michael John Galbraith