

Easter Sunday 2020

As we celebrate Easter this year, we find ourselves surrounded by a strange emptiness. When we go into the grocery store we see empty shelves. We don't have rush hour, since our streets have been emptied of normal traffic. Offices are empty as many people now work remotely from home. Schools, normally bustling with the energy of children, are empty until, presumably, the fall. Bars, restaurants, stores and anything deemed non-essential services are devoid of workers and clientele. Even our churches, usually filled to overflowing in these most holy of days, stand empty as we, too, do what we must in response to the public health imperative.

Perhaps the most troublesome form of emptiness is that found in many hearts right now, of which the encircling barrenness is a reflection. Because of the coronavirus and its aftermath, people feel bereft of hope, the void within caused by the evacuation from their minds and hearts of many dreams and expectations.

This vacancy might well overwhelm us were it not for the emptiness discovered by Mary Magdalene, Peter and John on Easter morning. I'm speaking, of course, of the empty tomb. Today the Church invites us to ponder carefully the significance of this empty space, and allow it to encounter and speak to our own.

Early on that first Easter day, Mary went to the tomb and saw to her horror that the stone covering it had been rolled away. Assuming this was the work of grave robbers, she rushed to Peter and John to tell them that the body of Jesus had been taken, its whereabouts unknown. Peter and John go running to the tomb and enter it. They found that it was, indeed, empty. There was no sign of the body of the Lord.

But there was something unusual about this emptiness beyond the fact of the absent body. In writing his Gospel account, St. John lingers over some details in order to be sure we notice something important. He takes time to describe the linen cloths that had wrapped the dead body of Jesus. Some were lying on the ground, but the one that had wrapped his head was rolled up and placed not with the others but by itself. What this suggests was a careful, deliberate and unhurried action by someone. That someone, we know, was no grave robber but Almighty God, who raised Jesus from the dead. St. John entered that tomb with St. Peter, and what he wants us to see is that God, in some mysterious way, had acted in that very place.

This is extraordinarily important for us, in our present emptiness, to grasp. There is no emptiness in God, only fullness; the fullness of life and of love. This fullness of God came to the tomb, evacuated it of death and filled it with life, the new life of the Risen Christ. This tomb, therefore, though physically empty, in truth brims over with hope. This hope breaks forth from the tomb into the world as a brilliant light that dispels all darkness of fear and doubt. It seeks now to fill the abyss created in our own hearts by the fearsome circumstances encompassing us. This is precisely what happened for Mary Magdalene. Her example is very helpful for us.

Mary understood well the experience of emptiness arising from dashed hopes. Jesus had brought her to life. But now her beloved Lord Jesus has been killed and she finds herself alone. Jesus appears to Mary in her anxiety. She does not recognize him at first, so he speaks her name.

In this personal address from her Lord, Mary recognizes Jesus. She realizes not only that Jesus is risen and alive, but also that he remains present with her. Aware of the triumphant love of Christ, her fear vanishes, her emptiness is filled with hope and she experiences both joy and freedom. No longer rooted in one spot by fear she runs in joy to tell the others.

Now, as earlier with the linens in the tomb, there is a particular detail of this encounter that speaks to us today in a strikingly direct way. When Mary first recognized Jesus, she called him by the name that she had always used in the past to address him, *Rabbouni*, and sought naturally to embrace him in joy. Her wanting to hold on to Jesus as she uses a prior title indicates a desire to hold onto the past, to cling to the familiar. When Jesus says “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father,” he is not being cruel, but is making it clear that something radically new has happened in his rising from the dead, a newness that henceforth must shape her life and that of the world. His response is an invitation to let go of the past and allow the risen Jesus to transform her life, both now and in the future.

As we grapple with the changes brought about by COVID-19, we sense that things will be different going forward. By dint of circumstance, we may well be forced to let go of past practices and assumptions, and take up new ways of doing things. As this all unfolds in the weeks and months ahead, the example of Mary encourages us to be careful – very careful – not to allow a virus to be the ultimate determinant how we live, but the risen Lord Jesus. Let him be our change agent. Let him point out the elements of our past we would well be rid of so that we can embrace the hope and joy he brings in any and every circumstance, however difficult. He loves us, he is with us and knows better than we do the deepest changes that need to take place in our lives if we are to experience real hope in him.

Hope-filled change began for Mary when she brought the emptiness in her heart to the emptiness of the tomb. Let’s do the same on this Easter Sunday. As empty streets and facilities engender sadness when we look upon them, Christians venerate with joy the tomb of Jesus precisely because it *is* empty. It announces that Jesus is risen, alive and with us now. May that announcement echo joyfully in the empty caverns of people’s hearts everywhere and fill them with the joy and hope that only the Risen Lord can bestow.

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St. Joseph’s Basilica (Livestreamed)
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