

Homily. Easter Day 2020

Dear Friends

Firstly, may I wish you a happy and healthy Easter 2020. It is a delight to celebrate the Resurrection with you, albeit in a very different way this year.

Being as most of us have more time on our hands than we would probably like at the moment as I was preparing this homily I thought, Why not enjoy the luxury of reading both of the Gospel texts set for this morning? They are John 20: 1-18 and Matthew 28:1-10. Both telling the same story but from a different perspective and originally to very different audiences. I then thought, while on a roll, why not add in St Mark's account as well but more of him a little later.

One of the things that immediately leapt off the page in the St John's resurrection narrative is that the risen Jesus asks Mary Magdalene *not to touch him*, implying that she is already doing so.

In this time of enforced isolation don't we all just yearn for the opportunity reach out and touch one another again? The friendly greeting of a handshake, the reassuring hug, the comforting embrace. We are corporeal beings, physical people, devoid of touch we become what is called 'skin hungry' and I know those who have not been able to cuddle their grandchildren or reassure their elderly or unwell friends or relatives feel so very bereaved of that natural and normally healthy opportunity to touch. As we are isolated Jesus' words to Mary, "do not hold on to me" feel both appropriate and jarring.

In verse 9 of today's Gospel reading from St. Matthew, the author goes further, clearly stating that the women took hold of Jesus' feet and worshipped him. Such a specific detail brings home that what has occurred, the resurrection, is essentially physical, tangible and empirically verifiable. Jesus was dead – Jesus is now alive. This is no mass hallucination, no spiritual gloss – it is a corporeal reality.

Those feet that the women hold on to are the feet that they washed and cleansed many times after a day tramping dusty Palestinian roads. They know each unique bump, scar, mark and wrinkle. Jesus' feet are a crucial indicator to them of his identity – they cannot be impersonated.

Perhaps that is why Jesus entrusts initial knowledge of the resurrection to them, knowing that they will "get it" more quickly than the men, because they have a prior knowledge that ties up with the evidence before them. Counter-culturally, then, it's possible that Jesus views women as the more reliable witnesses. His resurrection has already shattered natural order; now he subverts cultural norms. Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1: 46-55), is made manifest by his actions. Women, the unregarded, disenfranchised members of society, are charged with being the primary witnesses, those deemed lowly rising to become founders of the Church and evangelists to the apostles.

The initial reaction of the women disciples to the events taking place around them is honest, raging fear, but they hold their ground. The simple human contact and care that they have previously offered has prepared them for this transformative opportunity to meet God, understand the truth of the Gospel and to be commissioned to pass it on.

In an age driven by scientific rationalism, it is often tempting to be apologetic about what's perceived to be scant measurable proof of the resurrection, to explain it away in spiritual and esoteric terms. However, our Gospels are clear that Christ's rising from death was physical, observable and tangible, as well as being a radical remodelling of natural and social hierarchies.

This revolutionary, cosmic transformation is the Magnificat in action – new life blossoming, not as the servant of worldly elites, but with explosive generosity among those whom society deems to be worthless – those who are outcast, voiceless, poor. When we try to live as Easter people, perhaps our starting point should be, like the women at the tomb, simple, tangible acts of caring and contact that sing with the hope, joy and challenge of resurrection. Our challenge this year is to find new ways to make that contact.

*Now, this is actually a pretty good place to finish a homily so, if you want to hop off now, that would be absolutely fine. If, however you feel you'd like a little more, by all means read on.*

I have found some consolation in some material recently published by the contemporary theologian Christopher Southgate. He too looks at those women who met the risen Christ on that first Easter Day but he reflects on St Mark's account. *Mark 16: 1-8*

St Mark ends his Gospel in a different way with a different the response again from the women who went to the tomb on the first Easter Sunday:

*'they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid' (16.8).*

We must acknowledge that this Easter has dawned for many people in a place not of triumph, but of genuine fear.

The resurrection accounts have been described as a reverse-grieving process, in which the witnesses gradually come to realise that the one who was lost is alive and breathes on us the Holy Spirit. Anger is dispelled, depression and denial and bargaining can all be set aside. But it's fair to say that for many of us, this Easter, we are not very far along in this process yet.

We would like to have the larger story, the story of victory over death, this Easter and to be able to look back from the other side of the Corona Virus Pandemic, to sing out to the sunrise that's it's all over and to sing with our hearts on fire. But it's too early to do this yet. Perhaps our heroes this Easter morning should be *those* women, St. Mark's only witnesses to the resurrection.

Mark is telling us in effect that where we are, in our confusion and fear, is a valid place to be. It's even a holy place to be, because it is real and it's honest – no bluff, no bravado.

The larger story will emerge – it is in the hands of the God who has done something extraordinary at the empty tomb. We are in a process of searching for this larger story, the one that will enfold and hold all the losses of this time, including the loss of freedom to map out futures, the loss of the power to fix things, the loss of the delight of gathering, and of the profundity of looking closely into others' eyes, the loss of reassuring and healing touch, for some the loss of parents, grandparents or other loved ones we shall never see again, in this life at least.

This Easter is an Easter for holding together – by phone-call or Skype or Zoom or properly sanitized carrier pigeon or even that most precious of rediscoveries, the letter! the range of reactions we're all having, the different varieties of fear and confusion and amazement we're facing need to be shared and acknowledged and offered to God in prayer..

We have the Lord's songs to sing in this strange land, the great Passiontide song of *My Song is Love Unknown*, the Easter hope of *Jesus Christ is risen today*, but let us sing them not, as perhaps we may have done in the past, with a false and self-forgetting triumphalism. Instead let us sing them as explorers who will help each other search for the larger story in all this, owning our fear, sharing our wisdom as it returns to us, hoping for what we do not yet see.

The women in Mark's Gospel half-ran, half-stumbled away from the tomb, carrying the greatest secret in the history of the world. And Christians this year are bearers of a secret too, a different secret, one that we may not feel we are even ready to tell yet, but it is our clue to the larger story within which all this trauma will one day be seen to sit.

Alleluia, Christ is risen, he is risen indeed. Alleluia!

With every blessing

Peter