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The readings for Easter Sunday seem to be a letdown from the no-holds-barred celebration of the Vigil that took us from creation through Christ's resurrection, punctuated with the new fire, bells and all those alleluias. On Easter morning the church takes a step back to say, "Now we need to think about all of this and integrate what it means." That's the process we'll be involved in for the next 50 days.

Today's selection from John's Gospel can't be considered as much more than an inconclusive resurrection account. It tells us that when Mary of Magdala and Peter and "the other disciple whom Jesus loved" saw the empty tomb, the beloved disciple "believed" but that none of them understood, leaving us with Mary Magdalen's core question: "Where is the Lord?"

One message this Gospel brings home is that our alleluias may be too facile. The disciples who knew Jesus most intimately were devastated at his death and confounded by the first signs of resurrection. Because of that it's probably a very good thing for us to be left with Mary at this point in her experience. If we can't imagine her devastation, we'll never understand her Easter joy.

When we read the resurrection Gospels objectively we realize that the empty tomb didn't prove anything. Far from being a sign of hope, it was more like a doubling down on the disciples' depression. The only really good news in this selection is that the beloved disciple "saw and believed," but what exactly he believed remains unclear. At best, he believed that Jesus had returned to the Father, a situation that did little to address the bitter angst of the question Mary represented for all of them, "What happened to the Lord?" along with, "What does it mean for us?"

In the face of that question, the Letter to the Colossians tells us to seek what is above. While that might sound like a prescription to imbibe in a good dose of denial, in reality it's exactly the opposite. The author who writes in Paul's name tells us to fix our hearts and minds on Christ who is seated at the right hand of the Father. That will sound like pie in the sky until we remember what the early church would have envisioned when they heard it. Rather than picturing Christ the King robed in fine liturgical vestments, their image of the risen Lord had hands, feet and side scarred by the crucifixion. The original evangelizers had vivid memories of the man who had been beaten, mocked and spat upon, the one who had somehow found the breath and spirit to forgive his enemies as he died at their hands. When the early Christians set their minds on what was above they saw the innocent victim, now risen and continuing to share the power of God's invincible love.

Experts say that addicts can't be helped until they have "hit bottom." In the same way, only those who have endured a measure of Christ's passion or suffered in solidarity with those who have can fully appreciate what it means to "think of what is above, not what is on earth." In this sense, earth is the realm of injustice, envy and lies. It is the sphere in which Mary wandered on that first morning, the place of cruelty on top of death.

We know that later on that first day Mary would encounter Christ and would have her eyes raised to a different plane. As Paul says, Christ her life was about to appear and transform her imagination. As a result of her encounter with her risen Lord, she would begin to understand how Christ's resurrection changes everything. The wounds of Jesus had not disappeared, but they did not define him and the forgiveness he offered promised that those wounds need not define those who inflicted them. As she grasped this reality she was envisioning "what is above."

John and Paul convey this mystery in heady language. In today's first reading Peter says it more simply. He tells the bare bones story of Jesus and does his best to

explain the resurrection. What it all comes down to for Peter is that knowing Jesus and meeting him as risen Lord converted him and his fellow witnesses into apostles, people who continued Jesus' own mission of proclaiming forgiveness.

Today's readings offer us a variety of approaches to the Easter mystery. They invite us to consider our own experience as a Gospel to be shared. We may know Easter faith as a slow journey from desolation to hope. It may be a vision of transformed reality that orients us to live each day from above. It can also be like Peter's simple response, "We knew it, saw it, and now must proclaim it." There are many models, and ours will probably grow and change. What is essential is our response to the question: "What does it mean for us?"

### **ACTS 10:34a, 37-43**

This reading, Peter's last missionary speech takes place in the house of Cornelius, the Gentile who is coming into the Christian fold. But our reading concentrates on the speech rather than the context. Peter's homily is actually a very short summary of faith in Christ, proclaimed to people who apparently already knew the basic message Peter was talking about, but for whom Peter — or Luke who published the homily — wanted to focus the message. In some ways this is a summary of Luke's Gospel, even following the geographical pattern from Galilee to Jerusalem and the timing from John the Baptist through the Resurrection. But true to his purpose in writing Acts, Luke demonstrates through the work of the early church that Jesus' project would continue to spread to all cultures and to the ends of the earth.

Peter's mention of Jesus' anointing is probably a reference to his baptism, interpreting the idea as less dependent on oil than on God's favor resting on him. Addressing a Gentile audience, the word Luke had Peter use for "doing good" was one which was often applied to the beneficial deeds of kings, an allusion that would not have been lost on the original audience. The idea of anointing and doing good placed Jesus in the context of the long-awaited king who would bring justice.

In addition to "doing good," Peter says that Jesus healed all those oppressed by the devil. The word used for oppression was generally used to describe the plight of the poor at the hands of the wealthy, thereby implying that the healing Jesus did freed people from demonic influence, including fear of death. While we might take that as a foray into the world of myth, we could also think of it as the way Peter would describe what happened to him as a result of his relationship with Jesus. After all,

the whole point of Peter's preaching was to share the good news that had changed his life.

What had changed in Peter's life? Perhaps more than anything else, he became free from the fear that had controlled him. Peter was the disciple who had insisted on shielding Jesus from harm — refusing to accept that Jesus should suffer, and later by wielding his sword when Jesus was arrested. But then when he was unarmed he feared to admit that he knew Jesus, the prisoner. Additionally, it's not hard to believe that Peter's habitual vociferous bravado had more than a little to do with hidden fear.

The Peter we hear in this homily is different. His focus is on the message about Jesus, not himself. Additionally, while he does not shy from mentioning Jesus' crucifixion, he says much more about what Jesus did before and after his resurrection. Peter's fear has been overcome. He is willing and able to preach even though followers of Jesus are already being persecuted. Even more, he is able to change his certainties and doesn't have to cling to what he thought was right. This very homily came about as the result of his accepting Gentiles into the fold.

Peter ends his homily by telling his hearers that belief in Jesus brings forgiveness of sins. That's exactly what Peter has experienced. The risen Christ had sought him out with a message of peace. Peter is no longer defined by his past and has no fear about the future. That is good news he cannot keep to himself.

### **COLOSSIANS 3:1-4**

At the time of the Ascension, Luke has the angels ask the disciples, "Why are you looking up?" The idea was that they should stop sky-gazing and get to work on the mission. In today's selection from Colossians, Paul (or his surrogate) gives the opposite advice: "Seek what is above."

The exhortations are not really opposed to one another. Luke's angels are telling the disciples that they can't just sit around waiting for Jesus to return. Paul is orienting them for their mission.

Some commentaries talk about this selection as "apocalyptic," a type of literature that looks to the end times and the final, often bloody, victory of good over evil. An alternative view is to see this as eschatological, thereby putting the emphasis on the

goal of history. Both look to the end, the first with dramatic foreboding and the promise of cataclysm, and the latter, at least as proposed in this reading, as the coming resolution of everything in Christ.

## **JOHN 20:1-9**

The Gospel of John is coming to an end. John's reflection opened with the words: "In the beginning." With that John signaled that what followed would contemplate God's work of creation as an ongoing activity of love that came to fulfillment when Jesus, raised up on the cross, proclaimed, "It is finished." The next scene opens in the early morning "on the first day" of God's new creation.

John wants us to notice that it was still dark when Mary saw that the tomb's stone had been moved. That stone, like the one in the story of Lazarus, symbolized the incontrovertible power of death. The stone was immovable, proclaiming that the seal had been fixed, the story of Jesus' life had run its course and the conclusion was obvious.

While in the dark, Mary saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. It made no sense. She might as well have seen the sun rising in the west or rain rising from the grass toward the clouds. There was but one logical conclusion: Some enemy decided to guarantee an end to even the memory of Jesus by desecrating his resting place. Mary had been the first to decide to honor Jesus' memory by visiting his tomb. When even that possibility was ripped from her she ran to the disciples. Finding Peter and another disciple she gave them her interpretation of the events: Some unnamed "they" were prolonging the humiliation of the crucifixion by stealing the broken body of their beloved Lord.

The two of them ran back with Mary, prepared to see destruction on top of death. The one peeked into the tomb, but allowed Peter to go in first. It was not a robbery — everything was well placed, just not in any conceivable order. The scene was contrasted to that of Bethany where Lazarus was raised but had to be released from all the accoutrements of death. In Jesus' tomb the burial linens were there to see and the veil that had covered his head was placed to make it clear that it was unneeded. The evangelist says that the beloved disciple followed Peter into the tomb to see all of this and that unlike Peter he "believed." But John immediately qualifies that statement by reminding us that, "they did not yet understand the Scripture that he had to rise from the dead."

In her book, *Written That You May Believe*, Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Sandra Schneiders helps us understand that enigmatic situation by suggesting that when the beloved disciple looked at the face veil in the tomb he saw a sign, a revelation of Jesus' glorification. The face veil, a real part of the burial dress, called to mind the veil with which Moses had covered his face in Exodus 34:33-35. As Schneiders points out the beloved disciple saw in that discarded veil a sign that "the new Moses has definitely put aside the veil of his flesh as he ascends into the presence of God to receive ... that glory which he had with the Father before the world was made."

In a paradoxical way, Mary's assumption that the empty tomb was a continuation of the mystery of the cross was correct. But she was misinterpreting the mystery of the cross by seeing it as death and humiliation rather than glorification. According to John's Gospel, the moment of Jesus' death was the moment of his ascension to the Father. Jesus had explained that more than once while he was with them. (See John 3:14, 8:28, 12:32.) What the beloved disciple believed was that the cast-off face veil represented Jesus' return to the Father. He would never again be among them in mortal flesh.

This is the beginning of Easter faith; it recalls what Jesus said at the Last Supper: "I came from the Father and have come into the world. Now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father" (John 16:28). The beloved disciple believed that Jesus the Christ had risen, that he is the Son of God whose life and death definitively reveal who God is. The beginning of Easter faith was this belief about what had happened to Jesus. What would fill out that faith would be the experience that taught the disciples what Jesus' resurrection meant for them. That part of the story begins as soon as the two male disciples return home and Mary meets the risen Christ in the garden.

## **Planning: Easter Sunday**

**By:** Lawrence Mick

This week begins with the celebration of the Easter Vigil and ends with the forty-seventh observance of Earth Day. Do you see a connection? Many Christians would answer in the negative, which indicates just how far we have divorced our religious awareness from the natural world.

The Easter Vigil, our most solemn celebration, retains many ancient elements that point to a time when this divide between the “natural” and the “supernatural” was less pronounced. It is a celebration that incorporates many elements of nature and encompasses the whole sweep of the cosmos.

Recognizing these elements requires us to broaden our view of Easter beyond the moment of Christ’s resurrection from the tomb. That’s central to the feast, of course, but Easter has a much wider scope.

Think of how we start — in darkness around a blazing fire. Immediately we are immersed in nature and the forces that shaped the universe. “In the beginning . . . darkness covered the abyss” until God said, “Let there be light.” When we get to the Liturgy of the Word, we start with the Genesis story of creation. Before that, we process into the darkened worship space and sing the Exsultet, which is replete with cosmic references: “Exult, hosts of heaven ... let earth be glad ... Adam’s debt ... dry shod through the Red Sea ... pillar of fire ... victorious from the underworld ... the work of bees ... things of heaven are wedded to those of earth ... mingle with the lights of heaven ... the Morning Star that never sets ... coming back from death’s domain.”

After listening to readings that lead us from the first day of creation to the first day of the *new* creation (Easter), we celebrate baptism, confirmation and Eucharist using the natural elements of water, oil, bread and wine to mediate God’s presence among us.

Preachers and planners can assist the assembly to appreciate these cosmic connections in gentle ways. Preach about the vast sweep of God’s plan of salvation beginning with Genesis and continuing beyond our present day. Compose petitions that encourage care for what God has created and uses to interact with us. Pray for the coming of the renewed heavens and earth — not new as in starting over but new as in fulfilled as God intended from the beginning. Use the natural elements richly, rejoicing in the gifts of light and water and oil along with good bread and choice wine. Perhaps, along with images of the Resurrection, put up images from the Hubble telescope suggesting creation and new creation. Rejoice in what God has done and continues to do!

## **Prayers: Easter Sunday**

**By:** Joan DeMerchant

### **Introduction**

What does it take to believe in the Resurrection? Many might respond saying, “If we had only been there.” If we had found the empty tomb, how would we have responded? As today’s Gospel reveals, all we have in this story is the account of

reactions to that tomb, which changed people's lives both then and now. Some who saw it believed that Jesus had risen. On this day, we rejoice and we ponder the blessings of this astounding mystery.

### **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you were not in the tomb that first day of the week: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you relied on your followers to believe in your rising: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to believe that you are risen and among us: Lord, have mercy.

### **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** My friends, let us pray for all who long to be convinced of everlasting life.

**Minister** For the church and for all who cling to the story of Jesus' resurrection ... we pray,

- For those who do not believe ... we pray,
- For the courage to live as people of the Resurrection ... we pray,
- For those who yearn for good news in the face of war, poverty, sickness or betrayal ... we pray,
- For all who sustain life in others through research, medicine, counseling, physical protection or hands-on care ... we pray,
- For the protection of all life, from the beginning of life until the end ... we pray,
- For the protection of life on our planet as we celebrate Earth Day this week ... we pray,
- For all who are about to enter eternal life; for those who accompany them, and for those who have died ... (*names*) ... we pray,

**Presider** God of life: We thank you for all life and for the life you have bestowed upon us. Strengthen our faith in the Resurrection and our desire to show others the meaning of everlasting life. We pray especially for those for whom life is painful or fragile. We ask these things in the name of your gloriously risen Son, Jesus. Amen.

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