

GREAT VIGIL OF EASTER 2020

Our custom in this parish has been to read the great Easter homily of St John Chrysostom: insisting as it does that everyone is welcome to this triumphant feast, that the power of the resurrection reaches out and down and touches every soul, every aspect of creation. But tonight, it feels a little too soon, as though we're still waiting, still looking forward and trusting in something that has yet to happen, rather than looking back at something accomplished.

Over the past few weeks, I have been listening to Bach's Advent music: personally, I had the sense that Lent collapsed into ashes weeks, not days, ago, and we had all been thrust back into Advent. Lent is a discipline we must choose for ourselves, not something inflicted on us, whereas Advent captures that inevitable fact of human existence: that there are some things we must simply endure and wait upon. And regardless of phases of the moon and dates on the calendar, somehow Easter has always had its own logic: some years it finds us thoroughly in the moment, and other times, like the first disciples, unprepared, still watching and waiting behind closed windows and locked doors.

A few days ago, we read in St Matthew's Passion narrative that at the moment of Jesus' death, many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and later emerged from the tombs and appeared to many. In other words, the grace of the resurrection erupted from the very moment that Jesus breathed his last, was flowing through creation even while his body lay still and cold in death. For Matthew and all of the evangelists, Easter morning marked not so much the Resurrection, which no one actually witnessed, but the *manifestation* of the Resurrection to those who believe, the recognition of the Risen Jesus by the disciples outside the tomb.

Each of the Gospels recounts the Resurrection differently precisely because it was experienced differently, at different times, not an instant phenomenon shared homogeneously by an entire group of believers but something that some individuals grasped intuitively and experienced almost immediately, while others struggled to comprehend, and only gradually realized that the Risen Jesus was with them, and in them, and around them, that his inexhaustible life had pervaded their very being.

We see those contrasts among the apostles, with Thomas rejecting news of the resurrection outright, we see it among the disciples on the road to Emmaus, men who have heard news of the resurrection AND who are leaving anyway. The three days between Calvary and the empty tomb hold this space where the whole Christian community isolates itself in fear and anger and grief, struggling between faith and doubt. We are not a regiment of lockstep uniformity but pilgrims walking, limping, running along the same path, sometimes leading, sometimes following, often carrying one another. Wherever you and I are on our own pilgrimage between heartache and Resurrection, wherever our world is on its journey towards a new way of living, we are always moving through this sacred space, and held in the company of saints.

This is, of course, the week of Passover, and while all over the world, celebrations commemorate the liberation of Israel from captivity, the first Passover was not a victory celebration, but shrouded in fear and threat: freedom was not yet a reality, still the dream of a scarcely imaginable future. And over the centuries, how many Passovers have been observed in the same way, acts of defiance and hope, insisting that sanity and humanity would be restored, that life and goodness and mercy would in time prevail?

And these holiest days of ours began with a similar meal: the marching feet of soldiers and the clank of armor almost at the door, but inside the promise of endurance grounded in humility and service and abiding love. And every Eucharist we celebrate, no matter the season or the circumstances, is the same act of hope and of resistance. Perhaps the great theologian of hope, Jürgen Moltmann, ought to be required reading these days, because he writes about the Parousia, the second coming of Christ, not as something remote, "beyond tomorrow," but something imminent, always about to happen any moment, and that sense of urgency changes how we live in the present. We do not know exactly what we are waiting for, what it will look like, only that it will be recognizable to the eyes of faith, and it's almost upon us.

That's why the Gospel accounts repeatedly insist that what emerges from the tomb is not recognizable, and as muddled as their different accounts of the same event are, on this they are at least unanimous: In Luke, the disciples on the road to Emmaus are joined by Jesus, but their eyes are prevented from recognizing him. Mark explains the same event by saying he appeared in another form to the two disciples on the road. In Matthew, even as Jesus is about to ascend into heaven, some of them are still not sure who it is. And in John, we're told Mary Magdalene turns around and sees Jesus, but she does not know it is him.

Of course, this shouldn't come as a surprise: suffering changes us all. It changes us from within, even changes the way we appear. Having endured betrayal and abandonment, scourging and beating, crucifixion and death, Jesus will never again be who he once was. But the scriptures are making another point, daring to suggest that these disciples who knew Jesus so intimately in his daily life for years, had no advantage over us who know him at such a remove. Like us, they had to peer through a veil of pain and incomprehension; like us, they had to recognize his outline on the face of a stranger, in a voice calling us by name, in unlikely places and circumstances. The risen Christ is only ever recognizable through the eyes of faith: this is not a resuscitated corpse, the same old Jesus back again, any more than the risen life is simply more of the same, the old life that was ripped away from us, now restored and taken back up. And the life that lies ahead for you and me, for our entire world, will not be the same – MUST not be the same.

If we look for the pattern of Christ's life and death and resurrection, we will not discover it in some cyclical pattern, where we never really lose anything, nothing really dies, nothing goes away, it all just disappears for a while, and then we get it back. It's not true – and you and I know it. We do lose, and we lose painfully and grievously, and some things we lose forever. And the pain of those losses never goes away entirely, they leave holes in our hearts and in our lives that can never be filled, that we never want to fill because they have become shrines to what we have loved. No amount of Easter faith or Easter hope fills those voids, nor does it attempt to. One of the first acts of the Risen Jesus is to show his hands and his side to the gathered disciples: the wounds haven't disappeared, the trauma hasn't been expunged, it's just that now they mean something different, now they too are seen through different eyes.

Every one of us – the whole world – comes to this Easter wounded and broken. And no matter where we are on this journey, no matter where we have been and what has happened, ahead us is the risen life, not a makeover of what we once had, and the risen Jesus says to us, Peace, do not be afraid, have courage, it is I.

Things will get back to normal, but not a normal you and I have ever known. Our broken hearts will be alright – not because the clock will be turned back, not because sickness will be reversed, and death will no longer take its toll, not because the people who didn't love us, or didn't love us enough, are going to change their minds, not because the cracks in our hearts will be cemented over and made whole again; but simply that you and I will make some sense of this, we will heal, we will draw the pieces together and create something new and extraordinary; and we will love and laugh and be thankful. We will decide what we want back in our lives, and what we must finally discard, and our wounds and scars will be holy. We will enter into a new way of living that is not simply fine, but wonderful, sheer grace, and through eyes of faith – and only through eyes of faith – we will discern the presence of our Risen and Beloved One. And who knows, perhaps we will once again sing with Chrysostom

O Death, where is your sting? O Hell, where is your victory?

Christ is risen, and you are overthrown.

Christ is risen, and the demons are fallen.

Christ is risen, and the angels rejoice.

Christ is risen, and life reigns.

Christ is risen, and not one dead remains in the grave.

For Christ, being risen from the dead,

has become the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

To Him be glory and dominion unto ages of ages. Amen.