



1st Sunday of Easter



Date: Sunday, April 12, 2020 | **Season:** Easter | **Year:** A

First Reading: Acts 10:34a, 37–43

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 118:1–2, 16–17, 22–23 | **Response:** Psalm 118:24

Second Reading: Colossians 3:1–4

Gospel Acclamation: 1 Corinthians 5:7b–8a

Gospel Reading: John 20:1–9

Preached at: the Jesuit Institute in the Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa.

Dear Friends,

This is the day that the LORD has made;

Rejoice and be glad. Hallelujah, Hallelujah.

Happy Easter everyone.

We have been celebrating Lent since the 26th of February, and this has been a Lent like no other we have known. We have had to sacrifice so much: our attendance at Church, our reception of Communion, our freedom of movement. Our Lenten sacrifice this year has also seen us praying for the sick and for those we love; but it has also, I'm sure been a Lent we have gained much from, through our praying together as a family; through our expanded concern for each other; and the times we've been forced, by circumstance, to reflect and focus on those important matters of life and death. And today we celebrate the resurrection, the triumph of life over death. Because we've learnt that love is greater than hatred; and suffering, however painful, is never the last word. So let us today be witnesses to the Lord and delight in the saving message of Jesus Christ.

Our readings this morning invite us to a deeper form of belief. In some way they all touch on the quality of our belief.

Our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles is the end of Peter's fourth and final homily. As with all good homilies there's a summary at the end, and this is the portion we read today. It contains the major points of what we call the kerygma, which is a sort of summary of the belief all converts are required to understand and believe in. How Jesus followed John the Baptist, was baptized by the

Holy Spirit, how he worked healing miracles and delivered us from sin and the evil spirit; how he was betrayed and killed in Jerusalem, but rose again on the third day, how he appointed apostles to preach the forgiveness of sins and that this was foretold by the prophets in the Scriptures. It's the summary of belief, but it's also an insight into who Peter will become. Remember that Peter denied knowing Jesus three times, but Jesus still chose him to be the leader, the witness to his resurrection. Peter finds his voice in the Acts of the Apostles and is given the grace to boldly proclaim his belief. Each part of this belief will be touched on in the remaining seven Sunday's of Easter. And that's worth noting too, that whilst Lent had six weeks, Easter has seven, because the good news of Jesus' resurrection is at the heart of our faith and our belief in God's saving action in the world.

In our 2nd reading from the letter to the Colossians, we are invited to focus our gaze heavenward so as to see Christ. This is a theme in the Gospel too. What, or who, is revealed, and how do we react. We're told in our 2nd reading that when we see Christ revealed in glory, i.e. in resurrection, we will also find ourselves revealed with him in glory. This means, I think, that the resurrected life that Jesus has is meant for us too. The invitation for us is to believe, and to live that good news.

Then we have the Gospel for today – and many of you may be wondering – where is Jesus? He's not actually there. And that really is the point – what is our reaction to not finding him. Because he is with us now in a new way, not like we have encountered him before. We celebrate his resurrection today, but we do so differently because, as we say at every funeral, life is changed, not ended. And we have to see Jesus in this changed way, with new eyes.

Our Gospel gives us three examples of the sort of reaction we might have in terms of our belief in the resurrection. I'm sure we shall be able to identify with at least one of them.

Our Gospel begins by noting it was still dark when Mary Magdalene came to the tomb. For the author of the Gospel, this means that Jesus, the Light, was not there. Mary is so distraught after noticing that the stone had been removed that she instantly runs to tell the other apostles. She loves Jesus and cares for him deeply, that is why she is the first to arrive at the tomb – but she does not believe yet, her grief stops her from even entering the tomb, she just notices that the

stone was rolled away, and so she calls Peter and John. (We know that immediately after this Gospel Jesus himself will appear to Mary and she will declare that ‘I have seen the Lord’ and so become the Apostle to the Apostles, but at this point she is just in mourning, and she can only jump to the conclusion that ‘they’ have taken Jesus away. There is confusion and unfaith in her not remembering what Jesus had said would happen on the 3rd day... and like many religious people, a tendency to scapegoat quickly when feeling upset) That can sometimes be us, right? We know our belief, but when tragedy hits we’re just overwhelmed and we end up in sorrow and confusion. If that is us, we can take strength that in such situations Jesus himself will find a way to appear to us. Perhaps, like Mary Magdalene, we will not recognize him immediately, but when we do recognize him, our faith will be surer and stronger. Have there been times when we might have felt overwhelmed with tragedy and found it hard to believe in Jesus’ resurrection, or even in Jesus himself? If so, I invite you to identify with Mary Magdalene this morning.

But now let us turn to look at the reactions of John and Peter. John, the beloved disciple, arrives at the tomb first but he waits for Peter. Some theologians like Hans Urs von Balthasar and others have noted that Peter being the one to whom authority was given represents the ecclesial office, whilst John, the one whom Jesus loved in a special way, represents ecclesial love. I’ve often found this insight comforting to realise that even at the beginning, the official church often arrives at a point of belief after the loving church has already discovered something. But that part of the church waits patiently for the authorities to realise what it is before them. John sees past the empty tomb and notices the burial clothes and waits.

And Simon Peter eventually then arrives and notices not only the burial clothes, but that the head cloth had been neatly folded. Biblical scholars often point out that when Jesus called forth Lazarus from the dead he appeared still wearing those burial clothes – and in fact that head cloth is specifically mentioned, and so in a way Lazarus still bore the trappings of death, but with Jesus, all these trappings of death have remained behind. This tells us that Jesus conquered death, but whilst we’re told Peter sees this fact, there is no reaction in him. We can only imagine how Peter must have been feeling a mixture of raw emotion. Remember, he had been the leader, the most committed to the Lord, but then he had denied knowing Jesus three times. There was a mixture of confidence and

despair in him. He wasn't able to see the whole truth because he had hurt the Lord with his denial. Isn't that like a lot of us in our journey of faith with God. We can be confidently committed to him in one moment, and then when we sin we deny even knowing the Lord and act as if we didn't. Like Peter this means we battle to understand the whole truth of what is plainly before us. Jesus suffered, died and rose again because he loved us. But whilst we might know parts of that, we find it difficult to accept God's love because we feel we do not deserve it because of our denials and our imperfect love, and so we do not totally believe. If that is you, take comfort that Jesus still loves and trusts Peter, and he still loves and trusts us. And remember how Peter appears in the first reading, it's possible for our faith and our belief to grow and develop.

Then we have the 'other disciple'... who arrived first, saw the clothes, but waited for Peter. His relationship with the Lord is stronger, which is why he ran faster. He sees the same clothes, and we're simply told that "he saw and he believed" that Jesus rose from the dead.

I think the invitation today is for us to believe like the other disciple, John, whose Gospel account we are reading. John's belief comes from a deep and intimate friendship with the Lord – he is the 'beloved disciple' or 'the one whom Jesus loved'. John is the one who believes without seeing Jesus. Mary will later have Jesus come, and she in turn will tell Peter, but John already believes. We are being asked to identify with John because, like him, do we believe without seeing him? Have we experienced Jesus' love for us? Can we take up the challenge to be like John and nurture the loving relationship we have with the Lord and so believe?

What we're being asked to believe is that Jesus rose from the dead today. We all might be at different stages of being able to proclaim that good news. And that's ok, because even the first disciples received that news in different ways and progressed differently. If our proclamation of Hallelujah feels different to others, that's ok. But pray that you might trust that God is working something inside of you and helping you to believe.

It might be helpful for us to look at the moments of resurrection in your own life? Those moments where Jesus has revealed himself to you, because I firmly believe that Jesus is already working in your own life, finding ways to reveal himself to you. Perhaps it might be like Mary, in moments of grief and tragedy,

or like Peter in gifts of courage to dispel our confusion and embolden us to be witnesses to others. Or maybe it's like John, who has faith and hope because he loved already, and so is more easily trusting that the Lord is risen.

As we make a spiritual communion today, I'd like to invite you to remember those moments in your life when you felt God's love for you. Perhaps it is a recent experience, perhaps it was when you were younger. At communion time focus on God's love for you. Ask God today to help you re-experience that love, so that like John, you might see and believe in the Good News, without having seen. Trust your experience of God's love for you, ask God to deepen that experience so that you might truly know God's love, and share that good news with others.

I wish you my dear friends, and to all your loved ones, a happy and holy Easter.

For this is the day that the LORD has made;

Let us Rejoice and be glad.

Hallelujah, Hallelujah.

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