

Easter 2024

No other faith and no other philosophy does what we are gathered here to do. Many groups commemorate the birth of their founders; listen to their central teachings; perhaps even remember their leader's death. But only Christians celebrate the ***Resurrection***, the proclamation that death itself has been redeemed, reclaimed by God and transformed into the hope of eternal life. The Resurrection is the proof of God's mercy, with the power to heal every sin and rebellion against God. ***Easter assures us that suffering and death do not have the final word. In Jesus, Life itself entered death, and emerged victorious.***

These are words of faith, our ancient creed; but can they still speak to a troubled world? Against war and persecution, terror and sickness, conflict and fear, what can a vacant tomb signify other than more emptiness? We sing the Church's "Alleluia," but we might wonder – what really has changed? We profess that Christ's grave was empty on Easter morning; but even so, a tomb awaits each of us, somewhere, sometime. Does the Resurrection matter after all these sorrows and all these years?

The most profound words about Easter I have ever read come from Pope Benedict XVI, who said: ***"The Christian faith stands or falls with the truth of the testimony that Christ is risen from the dead. If this were taken away, Jesus would be a failure, revealed as only human after all. His authority would extend only so far as his message interests us. He Himself would no longer matter; the only thing that would matter would be our own judgment in selecting from his heritage what strikes us as helpful. We would be alone. Whether Jesus merely WAS or whether He also IS: this depends on the Resurrection."***

Whether Jesus merely WAS or whether He also IS. That is the question of faith, put to each of us ... do I merely remember Jesus, or admire Jesus, or study Jesus like I might another figure out of the past; or does He continue to speak to me, shepherd me, live within me?

Close your eyes and picture that Sunday morning scene: slowly walking with those two women named Mary in the dim half-light, the intense sorrow of Good Friday numbed as the slow hours passed until they could finish the burial of their Friend. What a frightening shock it must have been to see that huge stone

moved away. Their thoughts naturally go, as ours would, to vandalism and desecration. So, Saint John tells us, Mary runs to tell Peter and John, and they run to find the same empty grave; ***but they also find something else inside***: the burial cloths empty, and the head-cloth neatly rolled up. This is not something grave robbers would take the time to do. John testifies that he saw this, and believed ... but then says that they did not yet understand that Jesus had to rise. So what did he believe if not that Jesus had risen?

I think John includes this detail to encourage US whose faith is tested by waiting. At that tomb, John believed that God had done something remarkable, that some glorious joy was both hidden and revealed in this neatly rolled up cloth ... but he did not yet grasp it. ***And we are drawn into the story at that same point.*** We believe that God has done something remarkable in Christ: forgiven our sins, healed the world, revealed the depths of God's mercy. But we do not yet fully grasp it, either.

For the disciples, the Resurrection was just as real as the Cross. It was a fact they could not ignore or explain away; they met the Risen Jesus just as surely as they saw Him die. ***They knew Him, not as Jesus Who WAS, but as Jesus Who IS.*** He came to them, not from the realm of the dead, like a ghost or a spirit from the underworld; He came to them from the land of the living, from God, and sent them in His name. There is really no other explanation for their courage in insisting on this fact, taking on precisely the risk of death that just hours before kept them hiding in fear. They were no longer afraid; they were overjoyed.

By the Cross and the Resurrection of Jesus, the passing time of human history with all its sorrows has been drawn into the eternity of God's joy. Today, the risen Christ says to each of us: ***"It is I; do not be afraid."*** We celebrate Easter precisely because we do not simply remember that Jesus WAS ... He rejoices that He IS.