

Easter Gospels

April 1, 2018

Note: There are three possible Gospel readings for the celebration of Easter: Mark 16:1-7 for the Vigil Mass, John 20:1-9 for Masses on Easter Morning, and Luke 24:13-35 for afternoon celebrations. The Easter Vigil Mass is usually when the new members of the community are baptized and welcomed for the first time to the Lord's Table. It is a beautiful and faith-filled celebration. However, the majority of people attend one of the Masses on Easter Sunday. The text from Luke (Easter Afternoons) is also the text for the third Sunday of Easter, so the background and reflection questions for that text will be provided then

. The focus here is on the gospel texts for the Vigil Mass and the Easter Morning Masses. *As always, but especially during this wonderful feast, we hope these reflection questions help foster an awareness of God's desire to speak to you through these texts.*

Mark 16:1-7 (Easter Vigil)

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go and anoint him. Very early when the sun had risen, on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb. They were saying to one another, "Who will roll back the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back; it was very large. On entering the tomb they saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a white robe, and they were utterly amazed. He said to them, "Do not be amazed! You seek Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Behold the place where they laid him. But go and tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you.'"

Background:

This gospel text describes the situation the morning after the Sabbath. Jesus had died the day before the Sabbath. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome are going to anoint the body of Jesus. They expect to find the body of the dead Jesus in the tomb. Whatever instruction Jesus has given about his death and resurrection has not affected their expectations.

What they find once they arrive at the tomb is described in such a way that people of day would know that this is a supernatural experience. Physical reality has been changed; a huge stone that the three of them together could not have moved has been moved. In the tomb they encounter a young man clothed in white. In the Old Testament, angels are described as appearing as young men. "Tobiah went to look for someone acquainted with the roads who would travel with him to Media. As soon as he went out, he found the angel Raphael standing before him, though he did not know that this was an angel of God. Tobiah said to him, 'Who are you, young man?' He replied, 'I am an Israelite, one of your kinsmen. I have come here to work.'" Tobiah said, 'Do you know the way to Media?'" (Tobit 5:4-5) "While the high priest was offering the sacrifice of atonement, the same young men in the same clothing again appeared and stood before Heliodorus. 'Be very grateful to the high priest Onias,' they told him. 'It is for his sake that the Lord has spared your life.'" (2 Maccabees 3:36) The young man here at the tomb responds to the women's amazement in the typical fashion of a heavenly messenger. He reassures them, and

then delivers his message.

The women are commissioned to be the first to proclaim the resurrection. They had come to anoint the body of Jesus but are sent away with an entirely different task. God's plan for them is very different than what they had been prepared to do. There are still many questions that long to be answered: Why will the risen Jesus meet them in Galilee, and not there at the tomb or where they have gathered? Why is Peter singled out as one who should be told? Is it because he is the leader, or because he was the one who most vehemently denied that he even knew Jesus? Why is it that the angel appears only to the women at the tomb, and not to the men where they are? This text leaves many questions unanswered. The resurrection of Jesus, like his birth, leaves people free to respond with faith, questions, total rejection, and even open opposition.

Reflection Questions:

1. How do you respond when someone close to you has died? What gets priority, tasks that need to be accomplished, being present to those affected, your own emotions, or reassurance of your own faith?
2. As you come to celebrate the resurrection, what receives the majority of your attention?
3. What might have been some of the things going through the minds and hearts of the women as they made their way to the tomb of Jesus?
4. Does the fact that this gospel text focuses on three women have significance for you?
5. Are you disappointed that this Easter Gospel does not contain a dramatic account of the risen Lord?
6. The women came willing to anoint the body of Jesus, and got sent away commissioned to proclaim the resurrection. Do you ever feel like you are prepared to do one thing but God wants you to do something different?
7. Can you take some time to talk with God about whatever is going on within you as you come this Easter to celebrate Jesus' resurrection?

John 20:1-9 (Easter Morning)

On the first day of the week, Mary of Magdala came to the tomb early in the morning, while it was still dark, and saw the stone removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and told them, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they put him." So Peter and the other disciple went out and came to the tomb. They both ran, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and arrived at the tomb first; he bent down and saw the burial cloths there, but did not go in. When Simon Peter arrived after him, he went into the tomb and saw the burial cloths there, and the cloth that had covered his head, not with the burial cloths but rolled up in a separate place. Then the other disciple also went in, the one who had arrived at the tomb first, and he saw and believed. For they did not yet understand the scripture that he had to rise from the dead.

Background:

This familiar gospel text may seem a likely choice for Easter, but here, too, the Risen Lord is not encountered. Rather, the text centers on the empty tomb and the first disciples' encounter with the absent body of Jesus. However, the belief in the resurrection for John's community

was not based on their firsthand experience of the risen Christ, but on the testimony and faith of the Christian community. The faith journey of each of us begins, to some extent, on the faith and testimony of those who have come before us.

John begins this text while it is dark. Mary of Magdala, Peter, and the disciples are in the dark about what has taken place. When Mary discovers the empty tomb, she presumes that someone has taken the body. The possibility that Jesus has risen is not even a consideration. By suggesting that Mary had first believed that the body was stolen, John confronts those who have suggested that the Christians' belief in the resurrection could more accurately be explained by the fact that someone removed the body.

Throughout his gospel, John uses the lack of understanding of those who encountered Jesus as a tool for Jesus to further explain his role. Because of their lack of understanding, they receive a fuller teaching, and they are invited to move deeper in faith. Think of the accounts of the woman at the well, the man born blind, and even Martha and Mary, the sisters of Lazarus. The fact that Mary of Magdala does not comprehend what has happened is not a problem, because she has faith in Jesus. With her basic faith in Jesus, her comprehension will develop within her, as it does within all the early disciples. The texts used throughout the Easter season will highlight this development. Next Sunday the text will describe the disciples' first encounter with the risen Lord in the upper room. In a few weeks the Gospel will describe the two disciples on the road to Emmaus.

Reflection Questions:

1. In the beginning of the gospel the disciples are in darkness. Are there areas of darkness in your own life?
2. What impact does knowing that other people have grappled with questions and darkness have on you?
3. Why do you think John tells his community that Mary of Magdala went to the tomb first?
4. When you reflect on your relationship with the risen Lord, does it feel more like that of Mary of Magdala, Peter, or the other disciple in this gospel?
5. Why do you think Peter and the beloved disciple ran to the tomb?
6. How do you feel when you stand with other Christians on Sundays to say the creed together?
7. Can you take some time to talk with God about your response to this gospel, the celebration of Jesus' resurrection, or anything else that this gospel or the celebration of Easter bring to the fore?

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Excerpts from the readings for April 16 2017, The Resurrection of the Lord - Mass of Easter Morning

Peter proceeded to speak and said: "You know what has happened all over Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached, how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power. He went about doing good and healing all those oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree. This man God raised on the third day and granted that he be visible, not to all the people, but to us, the witnesses chosen by God in advance, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commissioned us to preach to the people and testify that he is the one appointed by God as judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness, that everyone who believes in him will receive forgiveness of sins through his name."

This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad.

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. Let the house of Israel say, "His mercy endures forever."

"The right hand of the Lord has struck with power; the right hand of the Lord is exalted.

I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord."

The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

By the Lord has this been done; it is wonderful in our eyes.

If then you were raised with Christ, seek what is above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.

Think of what is above, not what is on earth. For you have died, and your life is with Christ in God.

When Christ your life appears, then you too will appear with him in glory.

Or (alternative 2nd reading)

Brothers and sisters: Do you not know that a little yeast leavens all the dough? Clear out the old yeast, so that you may become a fresh batch of dough, inasmuch as you are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. Therefore, let us celebrate the feast, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

On the first day of the week, Mary of Magdala came to the tomb early in the morning, while it was still dark, and saw the stone removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and told them, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they put him." So Peter and the other disciple went out and came to the tomb. They both ran, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and arrived at the tomb first; he bent down and saw the burial cloths there, but did not go in. When Simon Peter arrived after him, he went into the tomb and saw the burial cloths there, and the cloth that had covered his head, not with the burial cloths but rolled up in a separate place. Then the other disciple also went in, the one who had arrived first, and he saw and believed. For they did not yet understand the Scripture that he had to rise from the dead.

Excerpts from Acts 10:34, 37-43; Psalm 118:1-2, 16-17, 22-23; Colossians 3:1-4; 1 Corinthians 5:6-8; and John 20:1-9