

INI

John 20,1-18

Easter 2015 — 7 April 2015

Greeting: To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; mercy, peace, and love be multiplied unto you. Amen.

We hear a portion of the Holy Gospel According to Saint John, which was read earlier:

But Mary was standing outside the tomb weeping; and so, as she wept, she stooped and looked into the tomb; ¹² and she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying. ¹³ And they said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him.”

So far the reading. Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O LORD, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Introduction: Whether in North America or Europe, Easter is not quite Easter, at least as *we* understand it. A recent survey, for example, in Germany showed that a good 10 % were clueless about *why* Easter is celebrated. Many young people believe that Easter is the birth of Jesus. Three percent believe that Easter is Jesus’ marriage anniversary – shades of the *Di Vinci Code*! Unfortunately, only about a third associate Easter with Jesus’ resurrection from the dead and therefore with the promise of eternal life. That means two-thirds live in various stages of ignorance about what Easter is.

Whether in North America or Germany, what does Easter mean? For about 81 % the focus is mainly on a family get together characterized by a good meal and fine drink. Only about 33 %, however, make plans to attend church to celebrate Jesus’ resurrection. The same percentage look upon the opportunity to have a long weekend

as the most important thing about Easter.

Well, enough with statistics. But what it shows is that mission opportunities lie as much in the West as they do in other countries.

But what is our hope and joy *when we* celebrate Easter? Naturally: *He is risen!*

But day after day, our hope and joy is made ever more uncertain by an unbelieving world. But today God would refresh our joy and hope. This brings me to my sermon theme for today, “**God Refreshes Our Easter Joy.**” I’ll develop this theme in three parts:

1) The Angel Speaks To Us

2) Jesus Speaks To Us; and,

3) We Speak To Others

1) The Angel Speaks To Us. Mary Magdalene and the other women must have been really shocked when they came to the grave on the first day of the week. She and the other Marys walked to the tomb. It was still dark. But they could hardly wait to apply the embalming herbs and spice they had brought with them. It was to be their last act of loving devotion for their Lord.

But then she saw that the grave was open. The heavy stone had been rolled away. But what is more – the Lord was no longer in the grave! This was awful. Their world was shattered. It seemed as if someone had taken Jesus’ body away.

The other women went to the grave to look a bit closer. Mary Magdalene, however, ran back to the city. She told Peter and John: “They have taken the Lord away and we do not know where they have taken Him!”

Peter and John, however, were not as upset. However, as John says, neither as yet understood the Scriptures that Jesus had to rise from the dead. Peter was befuddled but John believed, at least that Jesus was no longer there.

And Mary? She stood before the grave and wept. She was crying – with teary eyes she ran to the disciples and then back to the tomb. With teary eyes she ran to the gardener and then back to the tomb. She was completely overwhelmed with anguish and confusion. She just could not understand why the corpse was not there. Perhaps she thought that the force of her will could bring Him back.

Can many of us can identify with such anguish? It is almost like when a mother loses a child. The soul is gone. Life has vanished. And the mother wails at the body of her child. She cannot leave it. She hugs and kisses the remains.

But perhaps her heart is strong and her tears diminish as long she can still see her child. But when this is no longer possible, her anguish returns. Then she does what she can to beautify the grave site but finds it hard to break away from it.

Such inner love is also to be found among us Christians. We shed tears not only over those who are gone. It seems that the longer one has been with our Lord Jesus, the longer one has experienced His forgiveness, the longer such comfort has been sustained through Word and Sacrament — then the more painful it seems when one feels that the Lord is not there, when His help seems to have vanished, when everything seems to have reached its end.

Then when one seems to be completely alone, the tears flow. Then the anguish of the heart grows when it seems that one has reached a dead end and there is no turning back.

The love towards Christ is still there. The believer searches for places *where* there is an answer to anguish, pain, and loneliness. Where he or she can finally say: “I have finally once again found my Lord. *Now* He is once again by me.”

It is difficult to comfort such a wounded heart. But it is difficult to find such comfort by one’s self. We seem to be deaf and blind to what might comfort us.

But what did Mary see? There were the grave cloths of Jesus, in which he was wrapped, lying neatly. They had not been unwrapped and scattered about. And there sat *two* angels in white robes. One sat where Jesus' head has been and the other where his feet had been. Without a word, they wished to assure Mary that no human being took Jesus' body.

Where such heavenly watchers kept guard, they who were of the heavenly host, messengers of the Lord most high, *how* could any human being steal Jesus' body?

Like the cherubim who sat on the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies, so the angels sat in Jesus' empty tomb. And they rejoiced that Jesus had risen. They wanted to spread the Good News. An angel spoke to Mary, in order to comfort her: "Woman, *why* are you crying?"

It was a but a short sentence. But by means of this question, they wanted Mary so put her sorrow into words. She answered: "They have taken away my Lord."

God also puts questions to us by means of earthly messengers –, although usually not by means of angels. Then we should pause and think why we are so sad and in anguish. And then we should not keep our sorrow or pain to ourselves, but rather bring them by means of prayer to God.

God would open our hearts. He has compassion with our sorrows (cf Hebrews 4,15).

He Himself will take away the burden which He has laid upon us (cf Psalm 68,19).

This is the first part of reaching the true joy of Easter. God wants to open our hearts to take away all bitterness, all anguish, all pain, and all sorrow. As He says:

A bruised reed He will not break.

And a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish. (Isaiah 42,3)

And so to Mary but also to us,

2) Jesus Speaks To Us. The angel could only prepare Mary for what is to come. But even before he could see that Jesus was arisen, she left the tomb.

Are we like Mary, *who* would run away from those who would help her before they can even offer such help? They want to listen to us, to understand us. They want to comfort us. They are more than glad to help. But are we sunk in a funk in our sorrows? Perhaps we think: no one understands me. Why doesn't anyone have compassion for me? Why doesn't anyone help?

But God doesn't give up on us so easily. Jesus saw the anguish in Mary's heart. And He is there when she and also when we need Him.

But why didn't she recognize Jesus? Perhaps she was so wrapped up in her sorrows that she didn't think it was possible that Jesus was there by her side. Or perhaps her eyes were beclouded, as were those of the disciples on the road to Emmaus.

But Jesus **was** by her side. And Jesus is by our side, even when we cannot see Him. He stands by us, so to speak, invisible, and sees our anguish, our doubts, our uncertainty, our weak faith. He hears our cries and our complaints. He hears, even though no one else may be aware of our predicament.

And Jesus has prepared the help we need. He has prepared the time when we will recognize and feel His presence.

But Mary seems not to have recognized this. Jesus repeated the question the angel put to Mary: "Whom are you seeking?" But Mary didn't really respond to this question. She thought that he was merely the gardener. She thought that He might be the one Who took the body away.

Do we rashly speak in desperation or despair, not only with ourselves or with others, but also with God? Do we even want to hear

what anyone else has to say? Do we want to handle everything by ourselves and on our own, even though we are weak and cannot change the situation? Look at Mary. She wanted to find the body and then put the body back in the tomb, even though she probably didn't have the necessary strength to do it herself.

Do we cry and complain over things which we should not cry or complain about? Were Mary to find the body, then she really would have something to cry and complain about.

“If Jesus is not raised from the dead, then our faith is in vain” — life would be empty and without purpose! (1 Corinthians 15,14). “Then we would still be in our sins and be the poorest of all people” (1 Corinthians 15,19).

But as poor as Mary felt, with one word she would suddenly be filled with the joy and hope of Easter. Jesus called her name: “Mary.” In an instant, she knew Him as her Lord. The Good Shepherd again found His sheep.

The voice of Jesus brought instant recognition on Mary's part — her heart responded with joy and anticipation. And so we also find Jesus in His Word, and only in His Word, through which He speaks to us. Whenever temptations and troubles beset us, *we* should go to His Word and not look to our own feelings.

Our wavering souls must lay hold of the divine promises which will strengthen our faith. And at last we will hear and take to heart the voice of the Good Shepherd:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name;
You are Mine. (Isaiah 43,1)

But Jesus wants to strengthen Mary's joy. Therefore He said: “Don't keep clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father.” In the place of a weak physical faith, a stronger one should emerge. After His ascension Jesus would not be present with those who are His

in the same manner He was when He was on earth. With His ascension to the Father, Jesus has full fellowship with us and we with Him – but not physically but spiritually, through His Holy Spirit Who works through His Word. Then in faith *we* can take hold of Jesus.

So we pray:

Savior let me soon behold Thee
Face to face, — May Thy grace
Evermore enfold me! (“Why Should Cross And Trial Grieve Me?” TLH 523)

And as the angel and then the Lord has spoken to us, so then

3) We Speak To Others. The Lord gave Mary a mission: “Go to My brethren and say to them: ‘I am going to My Father and to your Father, to My God and to your God.’”

To bring to others the joy and hope of Easter is our mission as well. It cannot be any other way. Whoever has such great news of great joy and hope cannot keep it inside, but must share it.

But all too often we see this mission as yet another responsibility, another burden. Perhaps this is because we get tongue-tied. We don’t know what to say. We feel we might say the wrong thing. We might get in over our heads with obscure theological discussions. The list goes on, and as the list goes on we feel ever more guilty and inadequate and feel like giving up.

But we should be Jesus’ witnesses. This is a magnificent privilege that God has given to us.

For this privilege we can be truly thankful to God. And when *we* carry out this mission, *we* are performing the greatest act of love to our neighbor that we can.

What should we say? Jesus is arisen and has ascended to God. This is a fact. Christ is our brother *Who* gave His life for ours. And because of that, God is our loving Father.

What should we say? Perhaps keep it as simple as Mary's announcement: "I have seen the Lord." Where have we seen the Lord? God willing, right here as we gather around Word and Sacrament. Perhaps as we share a favorite passage from Scripture.

Beloved in Christ, it is a great joy that has been given to us. It hasn't been given to the angels in heaven — but it has been given to us. It has been given to us to share that Easter joy and hope that has been given to us. We should never try to quench that joy and hope that is within us.

Let us then be as quick and ready as Mary was to fulfill the task given to her and us by our Lord. That is the best thanks we can give to our Lord, to bring Him to others and show them what He has done for us and continues to do for us. Amen.

Now may the God of peace, Who brought up from the dead the Great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord, equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing to His sight, through Jesus Christ, through Whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

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