

'Triduum III: Sepulchre, tomb and womb'

Vigil readings ... Rom 6: *we went into the tomb with Him ... we too might live a new life.* Ps 117: *I shall not die, I shall live and recount His deeds.*

Lk 24: 1–12: *He is not here, He has risen.* Or: Jn 20:1–9.

We've been making a 3-days' journey with Jesus over these most holy days of the year — Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday into Easter Sunday. We have been following Him in this sacred itinerary, so as to experience the new exodus, the saving journey from sin and death to freedom and life. We are into the 3rd and final day, now, and our destiny is happily in sight. Day 1 was of *Sacrament*, in the Cenacle of the Last Supper; day 2 was *Sacrifice*, the bloody offering made by Jesus atop Calvary; day 3 is the *Victory*, and we congregate at the Sepulchre, that new garden tomb given by the sympathetic Joseph of Arimathea, where Jesus's body was laid hurriedly before sunset on Good Friday evening.

This part of the 3-day journey is surely the shortest, merely from inside the cave tomb, where Jesus's body was laid on the stone ledge, to outside it in the garden: from where the Lord's body was laid, wrapped in the linen shroud and the face cloth, to where He was first seen, by Mary Magdalene, very near the tomb. A matter of a few

yards. Yesterday (Friday) at the Passion Play in Trafalgar Square, the risen Lord appeared right on the other side of the square from the tomb. I don't think that it was even any such distance in reality; merely a matter of a few yards. But the spiritual journey He had undertaken was a long one, the harrowing of hell and breaking the bars of death's domain. Whilst we have waited quietly through these long hours of Friday night and Saturday, quiet hours as Jesus lies in the sepulchre, yet Our Lord has gone to the underworld. Jesus truly died on the Cross in His sacred humanity, and entering so completely into the human condition, has gone as far as was possible from His Father in heaven. Jesus as the Son of God, was, as it were, *stretched* from the Father: not just from heaven to earth in the Incarnation, but in the Passion He is stretched from heaven to hell, from the realm of paradise to the realm of death. No wonder His words from the Cross, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?" He feels the pain of separation from the Father as He enters into the sadness of death. But, as the immortal and eternal divinity, He can

now bring light and life into that realm of the dead. As ancient texts from the early Church speak, Jesus goes to wake Adam from the sleep of death, and finally bring him and all humanity waiting in limbo out into the light. This is the unseen journey that Jesus makes, even as His body lies in that Jerusalem tomb. Meanwhile, we have been waiting, unmoving, in quiet prayer at the tomb, honouring the dead body of our Saviour.

When one goes to the Holy Land today (and I sincerely hope that one day you will take the chance to go on pilgrimage, and get to be there at these Holy Places) — what does one see at the site of the Resurrection? Well, it's all within that same church complex, the 'Holy Sepulchre,' begun by St Helena in the early 4th c.: as well as the rock of Calvary, just a stone's throw away, is the *Aedicule*, a very ancient stone structure built to encase the rock of the cave-tomb that held Jesus's body, the rest of the rock face having been cleared away. In between the two, right near the church entrance, is the stone slab that is honoured and touched by pilgrims as the place of the

Lord's having been laid out after the descent from the Cross. In order to enter the tomb, one has to stoop low and enter a tiny doorway into an antechamber — maybe 10 or 12 people can fit in here at a push — and then through a second tiny doorway to be alongside the actual rock ledge where Our Lord's body lay, now encased in a more recent marble top. Here, only 2 people can be present at any one time, and you've just a few moments to kneel and take in the enormity of where one finally is — the site of the Resurrection! The last time I was there, autumn 2018, I was on pilgrimage with one friend, and we decided the best thing was just to go down early and see what our chances were of celebrating Mass. God blessed us with the most wonderful opportunity: an English priest, formerly from Brentwood diocese, but now working in S. Africa, had a small group on pilgrimage. He graciously allowed the two of us to join them for Mass, which they were going to hold in the Aedicule — at the Resurrection tomb. The first half of the Mass we celebrated in the outer chamber; and then the Eucharistic Prayer was offered on the very ledge of the

tomb of Jesus's burial, whilst the congregation could hear the Mass from the antechamber. The tiny inner space of the tomb has an image of the risen Lord for one to meditate on, and the simple words, in Greek, from the Gospel: "*He is Risen. He is not here!*" Indeed — we have arrived at this holy place, and no, He is not there! He is not encased in that tomb. He has risen!

So this is why our *Triduum* journey does not end at the tomb — i.e., not inside it, but *outside* it. The grave clothes are left inside (and there is some evidence that these cloths remain as relics: the Shroud of Turin, and the Mandylion of Edessa). But Jesus himself is not: He bursts forth into the world again, and we encounter Him alive again in a new and radiant form, His risen body, death having been conquered. This Easter night (day) we are still by the tomb, where the very first encounters with the Risen Jesus will be, to Mary Magdalene and some of the other women, who out of love for Jesus had gone faithfully in the early morning to anoint His body. Here, with the deep joy and wonder and eternal hope, that springs from

the Risen Jesus, we will be concluding our *Triduum* journey, intimately close to the all-holy, all-conquering, Jesus. But we know full well that Eastertide itself — these glorious 7 weeks that stretch ahead — will take us on a further journey, back to the upper room and back to Galilee, for more appearances of the Risen Jesus, and then out into the world on the evangelical mission that Jesus always planned for His Church. The very holy journey of *Triduum* days is drawing to its close, but its end proves to be the start of a new journey which the Eastertide Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles will present to us with power.

We have, by my side tonight, a form of the tomb of Jesus, a tomb that contains not the dead, but the living: the baptismal font, shortly to be blessed, and in which Katerina will be baptised very soon. Just as Jesus's tomb proved unable to contain the living Lord, even in His humanity, but was the site of His new life bursting forth, so the baptismal font is also not only a tomb for burying an old life, but the womb from which new spiritual life comes forth: life without Christ is left behind, dead; and life in

Christ rises. The water of the font, which could threaten only to be a sign of death by drowning, now becomes the life-giving water of spiritual life. Katerina enters the tomb of the font, and is re-born in the womb of the font. St Paul said this explicitly in the NT reading of the Vigil: “*Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.*” It is, for Katerina, a very short journey, from her seat to the font, and back; yet it is the journey of a lifetime: from not knowing or living in Christ, to the sanctifying and eternal life in Jesus.

This short but most important journey of our life, each of us has made in Baptism, whether as adults, or as children. It was, and is, the journey of a lifetime: this Easter we are reminded of it through renewing our Baptismal Promises, and being sprinkled with that life-giving water in which we came to life in Christ. As we conclude our Easter Triduum this night (day), our renewal

of Baptism is a powerful reminder that, just as the apostles by the death and resurrection of Jesus were then animated by the Spirit to go on to longer and longer journeys into the world, carrying Jesus to all humanity, so we, from the Holy *Triduum*, are to be refreshed in our Baptismal calling and commitment to keep on that journey of life that is specifically Christian. In other words, from outside the tomb, where we encounter the risen Christ, and from the womb where we have entered into baptismal life in Him, we now treat life as a *pilgrimage*, a sacred journey with a heavenly destiny. Our life, as baptized Christians, is not to end in death or decay, and we are not live it as such: we are to live life as a pilgrimage to a place where eternal life springs forth. We are headed to a tomb that cannot contain us in death, for we carry within the gift of the Spirit of Christ. We appeal to our loving, risen, Jesus to say of us at the end of life, as we are placed in the earth, words that give us hope on this journey of life ahead: *He is not here, he has risen!* Alleluia, alleluia!