

'Triduum III: non est hic'

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.*

Mt 28:1–10 *He is not here, He has risen!* or Jn 20:1–9 *He saw and he believed*

On Holy Thursday we contemplated St John's pithy phrase from the opening of the Last Supper, "*He loved them to the end.*" Yesterday, after the Passion narrative we focussed on another of St John's short texts, just one word in Greek in fact, "*It is consummated,*" as Our Lord expired in Sacrifice on the Cross. What phrase am I drawn to tonight as we celebrate the last and greatest day of the *Triduum*, this Easter Vigil? I think that it has to be this one: "*He is not here.*" The women come to the tomb to attend to the body of their beloved Jesus who had been buried hurriedly as the Sabbath approached on Friday evening. Instead of being able to anoint the body with the customary ointments and spices as intended, they find ... *no body!* An extraordinary vision of an angel, a rolled-back, open tomb, but *no body!* The angel insists that they are not blind, mistaken or deluded. "*He is not here.*" As usual, even shorter in the ancient languages: in the original Greek,

"οὐκ ἔστιν ὡδε"; in the Latin bible, 3 syllables, so blunt and unapologetic: *non est hic.*

This is our faith, this is the faith of the Church, we are proud to profess it. The truth of Christianity hangs on an *absence*, an empty tomb, a missing body that is not grave-snatched, but is risen! All the first experiences of the Resurrection are of this *absence*, this empty tomb: whether of Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, first thing; whether of St John and St Peter running to the tomb later in the morning at Mary's report. Easter does not begin with Jesus's Resurrection appearances, *but with the body gone*, the grave and face cloths left behind. It's a bare fact, a *datum* of history; this is what the disciples found. Of course an unexpected mystery for them, one they are slow to get their heads round, but they are reminded of Our Lord's prior predictions: "*He has risen, as He said.*" They could have known, had they listened, understood, believed Jesus's every word, but of course it was all so new.

We ourselves have to begin Easter — the joy, the new life — with appreciating this fact of the empty tomb.

We have to enter the sepulchre and be astonished, too, at this event. We need to stoop at the cave entrance, bow and bend low, kneel before the ledge on which Our Lord's body lay — you can still go and do this in Jerusalem today, at the Holy Sepulchre church ... at least, when the Middle Eastern armed conflict is over, which we pray is soon. And as we do so, we need to know: "*He is not here!*" On Friday night, dead in His human body, He *was* there: He lay on that ledge, His sacred humanity, so battered, bruised and bloodied. But not by the dawn of Sunday: by then He was *not* there. That which had wrapped Him — a grave shroud, plus a face covering, in the Jewish burial custom — were left behind ... and if relics such as the Shroud of Turin are in fact *bona fide*, then they remain with us still, tangible mementoes of the brutal killing of the Holy One. But He Himself, the Son of God, was not left behind to decay and become an ever-diminishing memory. As my favourite psalm, Ps 15, proclaims, as if the Son addressing God the Father, "*For You will not leave my soul amongst the dead, not let Your beloved know decay.*"

For when Mary Magdalene and the other Mary; and later on SS Peter & John, entered that tomb of Jesus, they did not find death, *they found life*. They had gone there in sadness, bereft of the One they had known and loved as the Messiah; but when they entered, they did not find death, decay and defeat, they found that the Crucified One was not dead; *He was not even there*. Again, in a pithy summing-up for which St John is so skilful, we are told (Jn 20:8) that, "*He [John] saw and he believed.*" The reality quickly dawns on St John, that, as He had said, He must rise from the dead. And so it spreads to the others, Apostles and the women disciples, that Jesus had meant it, and that all He had proclaimed of Himself, as "the Life" — "the Way, the Truth and the Life" / "the Resurrection and the Life" / "the Bread of Life" — was true. Life in Him was real life, blessed human life, the gateway to eternal life, Resurrection life offered to humanity. They entered the tomb looking for the dead; they exit the tomb knowing that *they now seek the living*; they await their spiritual & personal reunion with the Risen, living, immortal, eternal,

Jesus; ... and they will not have to wait very long.

For us, this new life, this actual defeat of death, is the very point, and the high-point, of Christian living. Communion with the Risen Lord, first through encountering the living faith of Christian believers; then passing through the gateway of Baptism and visibly joining the Church; sealed and strengthened in the Spirit's outpouring for mission, in Confirmation; nourished spiritually with the grace of all graces, Holy Communion — we enter into Life, for Jesus is that Life, and His Life is indestructible. Our Sacramental union with Him in the Church is real and therefore reaches into eternity — it affects our life, and *makes* our life; this mortal life is clearly not all there is, or that tomb of Jesus would not have been empty, and He could not have risen. Jesus's Resurrection victory is the 'first fruits' of the new Creation, and He desires to share that with us for all eternity — it is for this that He gathers us into His Church, the baptized community of the saved. We are so thrilled that tonight we are joined in the Church by Ava, Charlotte

& Rayan through the Lord's life-giving Sacraments of initiation: their life flows out of that place that held not the dead, but the living. This is why we receive into the Church our new Catholics at the Easter Vigil, the greatest annual celebration of new life in Christ. Every new member received is another bold new witness to the Resurrection, to life in Jesus, and to the meaningfulness of the world. *Alleluia, alleluia! Jesus is Risen!* Tonight our song, fire, candlelight, colour, and blessed water sprinkled liberally upon us (soon!) speak of that new life pouring radiantly out of the empty tomb, the life that filled the place where fear and death were supposed to be: no, Jesus's body is not there, but His Risen divine person is abroad, alive, almighty and all-merciful; and as He rises, He embraces us and welcomes us: with SS Mary Magdalene, Peter & John, we are saved and redeemed.

*Tell us, Mary: say what thou didst see upon the way.
'The tomb the Living did enclose; I saw Christ's
glory as He rose' ... That Christ is truly risen from
the dead, we know. Victorious King, Thy mercy
show. (Victimæ Paschali laudes)*