

John 20:1-18, Easter 2020

The Lord is risen, he is risen indeed, Alleluia!

I welcome you this morning from our Cathedral of St. John the Baptist in St. John's Newfoundland. I greet you with the traditional and very ancient Easter greeting of Christians all over the world on this most holy festival of our Lord's Resurrection. The bells of this cathedral, along with the bells of churches across our diocese and province rang out around 11 a.m. to proclaim that Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed!*

But Jesus is risen on an Easter Sunday unlike any in living memory. We proclaim his resurrection not to churches crowded with Easter worshippers but to churches that are empty, with the faithful remaining safe in their homes during this time of global pandemic, thereby ensuring the safety of others. Our churches, instead of being places of celebration and festivity, are more like empty tombs today, filled not with worshippers, but with silence. The writer Casey Kerins puts it this way: "Maybe, for once ... we celebrate the resurrection just as the disciples did: alone, in the silence, hoping the faith outweighs the fear" (Casey Kerins, *Encouragement for Today*). Think about that; the Good News of that first Easter long ago was not proclaimed to throngs of worshippers amid Easter processions but to one or two believers at a time, alone. And remember, for Christians the empty tomb is not a symbol of despair and sorrow, it is much rather a symbol of hope and new life. I recall the words of the angel to Mary Magdalene in Matthew's Gospel:

He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.'" (Matthew 28:6-9)

Jesus' empty tomb pointed his followers to a new place where they would encounter their Lord in a new way. In Galilee and far beyond Galilee. Our *Empty Tomb-Churches* today are pointing us to a new place of encounter with our Lord. And on this Easter, in our *Living Room-Churches*, we encounter him once again, not where we expected, but in surprising ways. Because of our empty churches and our loss of familiar community, there has been unexpected discovery.

Covid-19 has taken away our churches as we once knew them, but this is probably not the first time most of us have lost something truly precious. In fact, most of us know only too well what it feels like to lose something we treasured.

It may have been a favorite toy when you were a child. It may have been a loving pet when you were a teenager. It may have been a family keepsake misplaced since becoming an adult. In each case, for a time at least, that which you lost became the most important thing in the world to you. Upon discovering your loss, you probably searched high and low and inquired of others where it might be. And then, if your efforts were to no avail, you were faced with the sad prospect that life would have to go on without the object to which you were most attached.

The sense of loss can sometimes be so great as to turn our whole world upside down and make us feel empty for a time.

The sense of loss is magnified a thousandfold and more when what is taken from you is not an object or a pet, but a person whom you loved and depended upon and who made your life complete in ways no one else ever could. The pain can be so great that it seems like our very world has come to an end.

Have you ever felt that way?

If you have, then you have some understanding of how Mary Magdalene must have felt on that first Easter morning when she came to the tomb of the buried Jesus only to discover that the stone had been removed and his body had disappeared. John, in his Gospel, writes that Mary ran and told Peter and the other disciple: "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Peter and his companion came and found the linen wrappings and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head but, as Mary said, the body of her Lord was missing. Peter and the other disciple left again, but Mary remained alone to weep outside the empty tomb.

I have great compassion for Mary Magdalene. The Gospels suggest that she had not always lived a very good life. Jesus had healed her from some affliction in the past. Mary knew what it felt like to be degraded and dehumanized. But Jesus had seen something in her that no one else had seen. Perhaps she had not even been aware of it herself. Despite her life and circumstances, Jesus had seen the very image of God in Mary Magdalene and loved her in a way that no one else ever had. In Jesus she had found new life where before there had been only pain and death. Jesus was the center of her world.

Her pain was great when her Lord was crucified and taken from her in such a violent manner. And now, to add insult to her already grievous injury, the earthly remains of Jesus had been stolen.

But Jesus' love for Mary was so great that even death could not overcome it. John completes his account in this way:

As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord" and she told them that he had said these things to her. (John 20:1-18)

In an instant Mary's tears of sorrow and pain were replaced by tears of joy as the one person who was most precious to her, who made her feel like the child of God that she truly was, had come back in a new and wonderful way to fill her life with joy and love and peace. It is significant in John's Gospel that the first person to whom Jesus appears is not one of the male disciples. It is not one of the religious leaders, or one of the people with power and influence. It is to Mary Magdalene – a powerless, vulnerable, scared woman.

Jesus' love for Mary was so great that even death could not overcome it.

The Good News of Easter is that Jesus' love for each of us is so great that even death will not overcome it. The Good News of Easter is that the power of God to resurrect and restore is greater than the power of sin to demean and destroy. The Good News of Easter is that Jesus loves each and every one of us just as much as He loved Mary Magdalene.

The story of Easter is the story of God's love for all his children. It is the story of his commitment to bring life in all its fullness to all who believe in him. The Easter story is about Jesus and every one of us as he comes in his resurrected glory bringing life and light and healing and renewal to all who will receive him in faith.

We really need to hear the Easter Good News during this time of Covid-19 when it can seem as if we ourselves are in the tomb awaiting resurrection. And that may be truer than we realize. *For behold, I show you a mystery ... it has all changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.* Our world has changed in ways that we could not even imagine a few weeks ago. All that we knew to be familiar and comforting has shifted around us and even going to a grocery store is filled with all kinds of apprehension. We are spending long hours indoors alone or with just one or two others and our social contact beyond our homes is restricted to telephone calls and emails and various kinds of social media. Some of us have being laid off from our employment, and many have lost income. Family members and loved ones far away are beyond our reach right now and that worries us also. We long for this to be over, we long for a new beginning, we long for things to come back to normal.

But I suspect that things will never ever return quite to what they used to be. The change we are going through right now will alter many things in our world, and many of them will be for the good. There is a long road ahead of us yet but many of our communities and many of our relationships will change in good ways because of all this. We are already seeing new social connections as we look out for each other, particularly the elderly and the vulnerable. Let us commit now to ensuring that what we learn from this time of stillness and social isolation will be of benefit to the world around us well into the future. I share with you these words by Laura Kelly Fanucci, called *When This is Over*:

When This is Over

*When this is over,
may we never again take for granted:
A handshake with a stranger,
full shelves at the store,
conversations with neighbors,
a crowded theatre...
Friday night out,
the taste of communion,
a routine checkup,
the school rush each morning...
Coffee with a friend,
the stadium roaring,
each deep breath...
A boring Tuesday,
Life itself.
When this ends,
may we find that we have become*

*more like the people we wanted to be...
 we were called to be...
 we hoped to be
 and may we stay that way...
 better for each other
 because of the worst.*

~ Laura Kelly Fanucci ~

And there have already been changes for our churches. The nature of our faith communities is now based far less upon direct personal contact and more upon contact through the telephone and internet, although there is still an abundance of personal care as food and necessities are shared with those in need. Less of our time together is built around sharing meals and far more is built around coming together like we are right now. We may talk about “virtual church” but to those who belong and are cared for in this way there is nothing “virtual” about it. It is very real. I am looking into a camera with a microphone and you are seeing and hearing me through a computer screen and a speaker. We used to measure our church attendance in the hundreds, but on this Easter Sunday that attendance will be measured in the tens of thousands because of this new way of being the church.

And I find myself wondering what it will all mean when this season in our life passes. What will remain from this time? What will have died during this time? I am beginning to believe that there is a new life being prepared for us, and our churches will look vastly different. For one thing we will be livestreaming and sharing like never before, and the nature of our faith community will fully include those who cannot be present in person but who still desire to belong. And I fully expect that someone among us is going to start an online church with no building at all, only people gathered spiritually with each other and with their Lord.

It was hard for those first Christians to understand that the new resurrected life of Jesus would be different from the old. Remember that Mary Magdalene did not first recognize Jesus because something about him had changed. Yes, she was not expecting to encounter Jesus as she did, but even when she did, she did not first know him, until he spoke her name. So, when this is all over let us not look to find our churches as they were in January or February, let us return to our churches fully expecting to find only linen wrappings and grave cloths there because the body they held is no more and has already been transformed into something entirely new.

Come this fall let us not seek to resuscitate the old church just as it was, let us accept that some things may have already died so that something even greater can be born. It is not resuscitation of the old that we should be seeking, it is resurrection of the new. Some of our churches may look pretty much the same when this is past but some of them need to look very different. In a sense, on this holy Easter Sunday, we remain in a tomb of stillness and darkness and expectation, knowing that new life is already beginning and in Christ we find our own resurrection and our joy.

That's what Jesus did for Mary Magdalene. He came and saved her from the darkness of her own life and told her that she would never have to fear again for even the power of the grave would not overcome his love for her. And she was transformed from a frightened and tearful person not knowing what horror the new day would bring, to a joy-filled believer in God's love for the world.

May Mary's bold announcement to the disciples that morning: "I have seen the Lord" be our bold proclamation to the world this Easter morning: "We have seen the Lord." We have seen him and felt him ... perhaps not yet

in the bread and wine of the Holy Eucharist transformed into his blessed Body and Blood. But we have seen him and felt him in our scripture readings and prayers. We have seen him and felt him in our hymns and praises. We have seen and known Jesus in the faces and voices of those in need as we reach out in love.

May Mary's proclamation become our proclamation this Blessed Easter morning and forever more ...

"We have seen the Lord!"

The Lord is risen, he is risen indeed, Alleluia!