

Bridging Good Friday's Lockdown and Easter Sunday's Open-up

Easter Sunday – April 12, 2020

Acts 10:34a, 37-43; Col 3:1-4; Jn 20:1-9

'We are witnesses to all that he did ... They put him to death, but God raised him' (Acts)

Prologue: With the national lockdown, this is probably the first time in our lifespan that we're celebrating Easter indoors. It would therefore help if we were to highlight the experience of Jesus' disciples on Good Friday, locked behind doors at Jesus' death [Jn 20:19], in sharp contrast to their lives opening up, Easter Sunday, after seeing the empty tomb signifying the Risen Lord.

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. The lockdowns in all three readings can be seen as representing the lockdowns that we are experiencing firsthand, today. The first reading from the Acts of the Apostles—a continuation of the Jesus narrative as retold in the gospel according to Luke—is part of the sermon that Peter delivers in the house of the Roman centurion, Cornelius, which is a prelude to Luke's 'Gentile Pentecost' [10:44-48]. The next paragraph tells us that Peter's speech was so effective that, assisted by God's Spirit, even the so-called 'Gentiles' wanted to become followers of Christ and to be baptized. The important point here is Peter's role as a *'witness'* who, on account of his personal experience basically preaches: The same crucified Jesus of Nazareth is now raised by God. He *is*, indeed, the risen Christ. By narrating the story of Jesus Christ—with a past and a present—Peter is opening up a future for all of creation. Since no one will have attended the Easter Vigil, it might be fruitful to point out that all the readings, as well as the symbols like the Easter candle, blessing of the water and renewal of the baptismal vows, etc., are narratives of Life and stories of our salvation. Through the stories of Creation (Genesis) and liberation from slavery (Exodus) with 'faith-full' heroes like Abraham and Moses, the faithful are reminded that God *is* faithful. God promotes Life. Indeed, the same Crucified-Risen Lord is the same yesterday, today and forever. He will live and reign as the God of the universe, the God of history.
2. The passage from John's gospel has three diverse reactions to the empty tomb of three disciples: Mary Magdalene, Peter and "the other disciple, whom Jesus loved", John (vv.2,8). Mary comes to Jesus' tomb "while it was still dark" (v.1). The darkness is not simply physical but symbolic. Besides Mary being in the dark about what is going to happen to the disciples, the darkness evokes the dark void of Genesis (1:1). This suggests that Jesus' death is a curtain-raiser to the greatest event of human history: his resurrection! First, having no precedent experience of anyone rising from the dead, Mary anxiously runs to Peter and John with the only explanation logically possible: "They [some human beings] have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." (v.2). But, the neat arrangement of the burial cloths (v.7) does not validate such a conclusion. Second, Peter and John run to the tomb; and though John outruns Peter and reaches the tomb first, he sees the linen cloths but does not go in. Out of deference to Peter, the leader, he allows Peter to enter the tomb first, who sees the neat arrangement of the burial cloths. However, nothing is said about Peter's response. Third, John writes of himself: "the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and *he saw and believed*" (v.8). In the gospel of John, which is the book of 'signs', all three disciples see the same sign, i.e., the

empty tomb and the burial cloths neatly arranged. However, John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, holds pride of place here since his love makes him believe in the resurrection, more than any ‘proof’. Of course, all three will undoubtedly be witnesses of the resurrection.

3. In these days of lockdown, the opened up, empty tomb will have considerable significance. Later in the same gospel (20:19-23), the disciples will be seen as locked up behind closed doors and fearful on account of the Jews. But Jesus will break in with his greeting: “Peace be to you!” (vv.19,21) and will send them out on mission: the ‘Johannine Pentecost’. It’s said: “An empty tomb proves the truth of Christianity; an empty church denies it.” Ironically, this year, all the church-buildings will be empty. Thus, there will be the added responsibility for all Christians to renew their baptismal vows in the ‘domestic church’, at home, and to become aware of their role as *witnesses* to both, Jesus’ death *and* resurrection. A word of caution is in place: the empty tomb is not a ‘proof’ of the resurrection but a ‘*sign*’; meaning, the disciples do not believe that Jesus is risen because they have ‘proof’ of the empty tomb; rather, they believe because of their *experience*. As a result, they become ‘*witnesses*’ to this unprecedented event. Proofs coerce, but signs evoke the free decision either to believe or not. In this regard, Jesus’ choice of Mary as a witness to the resurrection is surprising; for, in the Palestine of Jesus’ time, women witnesses were ignored in law-courts since they were considered fickle-minded. And yet, although the witnessing would sound weightier if the Gospel-writers mentioned only male disciples as heralds of resurrection-news, why did they retain women-witnesses? Was it because they were sure that it was *God’s* good news—not *man’s*—and could thus never be silenced?

Linking the 2nd Reading and the Psalm to the Resurrection Theme:

This short reading gives the essence of the paschal mystery: “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (v.2). Baptism signifies the dying (down) and the rising (up). Jesus’ death and resurrection harmoniously marry earth and heaven, death and life, victim and victor, cross and empty tomb, lockdown and open up, Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Indeed, as St Pope John Paul II had said: ‘We are an Easter people! Alleluia is our song!’

In Lighter Vein: A fictitious and imaginative fable goes like this: It’s said that the Risen Lord appeared to his disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee while they were out, fishing in the deep. Thrilled at seeing Jesus risen after the crucifixion and death, Peter & co. called out to him, “Master! Come across to our boat!” The Crucified-Risen Jesus began walking on the water towards the boat. However, midway, he began to sink. Shocked, the disciples rowed towards him and pulled him out of the sea. Jesus was gasping for breath. “What happened to you?” Peter asked in disbelief, and added, “Before your death you walked on the water so easily.” Jesus shook his head and said, “Now I’ve got holes in my feet!” Funny though this fable sounds, it has a profound message: The Risen Lord always bears the marks of his passion.” No good Friday, no Easter Sunday!

Reflection: Too many of us focus on suffering, darkness and death; rather than on joy, light and new life. Covid-19 has brought us face-to-face with suffering and death like never before. How will you and I be ‘*witness*’ of Jesus’ resurrection? May this lockdown make us creative in opening up in new ways. He *was* dead, but He *is* alive. Happy Easter! Alleluia!
