

Easter Vigil 2020

By Dom Steele Hartmann OCSO

“Do not be afraid. I know you are seeking Jesus the crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised up just as he said.” (Matthew 28:5-6)

Easter this year feels more like that first Easter Day ... greatly overshadowed, as it was, by Good Friday (Luke 24:13ff): The disciples were all huddled together in fear behind closed doors. (John 20:19) In our COVID-19 world we, too, are afraid and in lockdown. His disciples experienced in the death of Jesus not just the loss of a friend, but the loss of the meaning and hope they had found in him; they were left totally bereft. In our COVID-19 world of lost jobs and lost freedom, of isolation and social distancing from friends and family, and, with no seeming end to any of it any time soon, we, too, suffer more than the loss of those many whose numbers only seem to grow, of those whom we love and know. As Pope Francis puts it, “This crisis is raising serious questions of faith for us, too: ‘What is God doing in the face of our pain?’ ‘Where is God when everything goes wrong?’ ‘Why doesn’t God solve all our problems right away?’”

Whatever meaning and hope we had in God now seems a little shaky. What this year’s Easter has to offer us is an opportunity to share something of the experience of that ‘incredulity and obstinacy’ with which the first disciples first greeted the Good News, in those dark days following Good Friday, that He is Risen. (Mark 16:14) For in these COVID-19 days, with growing numbers of dead, our God, too, seems missing in action. As one person put it: “What does it mean to celebrate resurrection when people near and far are dying by the thousands? What good can it do to insist that the tomb is empty when body bags are in short supply, mortuaries are at capacity, and mourners can’t gather to bury their dead? I don’t know. I’ll begin by saying that, because it’s the most honest thing I can say. I don’t know. I’m scared, I’m grieving, I’m bewildered, I’m struggling. Yes, I believe with all my heart that Christ is risen, and that his rising was and is consequential. But I’m still fumbling.” In these COVID-19 days, the clouds of darkness that gathered to blot out the light on Good Friday still shroud the sky.

“He is not here!” What we have is an empty tomb. As we stand there before its opening (John 20:3ff, 11), empty tombs have nothing to say; they merely beckon us, bidding us to come and lie here. Seemingly this is our new world, with its invisible assassin, the Coronavirus, hunting us all in every part of the world. In our fear, we can miss what is being said to us: “He is not here!” Last weekend Leunig’s cartoon caught the spirit of the times. A man is speaking with

a duck, that which is most primal in us, but he is not listening. "The world is changing," he says. The duck replies, "It's always changing." Intent only on what he is saying, the man goes on, "Our lives are in danger. We are in lockdown." The duck says, "Life is always changing. We were never free." Now giving free range to all his fears, the man says, "Many of us could die." "We all get out turn," murmurs the duck. The man says, throwing up his hands, "Nobody know what's going to happen." The duck says simply, "Nobody ever knows. This makes life interesting." Putting his hand on his head, he says, "We don't know what to believe anymore." The duck tries to calm him, "Keep an open mind. This also makes life interesting." Dejected, the man says, "We are living in strange times." The duck merely notes, "When were we not living in strange times." Listening to the media these days all we get is doom and gloom: How many have got it; how many have died of it; how many are flaunting the lockdown rules and so endangering the rest of us; and, all the many new restrictions we have to endure to fight it. And they keep telling it to us over and over, so that our fears remain heightened and alert for the smallest sign that the invisible assassin might be stalking us nearby. And so, we do not, perhaps cannot, hear what might be contrary to news of the unrestrained though silent carnage being wrought by today's Grim Reaper.

"He is not here," says the angel. Then, just to underline it, he adds, "Come and see the place where he lay." (Matthew 28:6) This tomb is not empty because it is vacant. Rather, it is empty because 'he has risen!' (Matthew 28:6) Ours was not to witness Jesus' Resurrection from the dead; no one did. But with this tomb, and so with every other tomb, the Lord puts before us that same choice he put before the Israelites when he made the First Covenant with them: "Today I set before you Life or Death, Blessing or Curse. Choose Life, then, that you and your descendants may live." (Deuteronomy 30:19) Today especially, as we stand before The Tomb, which is Everyman's Tomb, we can just wait fearfully (we cannot even huddle together because of social distancing) for our turn to enter in and lie down. Or, we can Choose Life and enter into a New Covenant with the Lord of Life. The message of this day is: "Do not be afraid;" "There is no need for you to be afraid." (Matthew 28:5,10) We are called to believe, even here at the door of the Tomb, that Life is possible. When the Risen Jesus encountered his disciples cowering behind locked doors, he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen. (Mark 16:14) We have heard the stories of those who saw him after he had risen; as we approach The Tomb (John 20:8), ours is a call to believe them.

As we nurse our fears in these COVID-19 days, we should hear him rebuke us for our lack of faith. In these days, now is not the time to drop our bundle, but to look about and ask, “How can we live ... even here?” Ours is a call to reach out (Matthew 28:10), in whatever ways are possible in these times, and tell everyone that he is risen, that Life is still possible, even here; in the New Covenant we strike with the Lord we are called to reach out and learn how to live in this place and in these times, and to do what we can to build up our neighbours, so that they, too, can live. (Romans 15:1-2) Sure, we’ll have to do it differently, but Life is still possible; we just need to work out how.

He is Risen! Happy Easter!