

## SOLEMNITY OF EASTER

### (Vigil)

Our scripture passage comes from the Gospel of Luke 24:1–12. The New Testament accounts of Jesus' resurrection are well known to us. Due to our familiarity with these texts we can easily overlook significant details by which each of the Gospel writers wished to communicate particular meaning. The Gospel of Luke offers numerous unique insights that are meant to inspire, encourage, and guide our lives as disciples.

In this passage we hear of the women who had accompanied Jesus from Galilee and were present for His crucifixion. Now they go to the tomb to anoint our Lord's body. When they arrive, they see the tomb open and the body gone. They went looking for Jesus in the last place they had seen Him, but He was not to be found there. Instead, two men ask them a question that is really a thought-provoking reprimand: "Why do you seek the one who lives among the dead?" (It should be noted that this phrase places the emphasis on "the one who lives" rather than on "the dead".)

This reprimand is an important instruction for all disciples who seek to find Jesus by looking for Him as they knew Him in a past experience. Sometimes we can think that Jesus was more real in the past than He is in the present. We can look for Jesus as He was 2,000 years ago in history and fail to recognize Him present to us now in the Sacraments, the Holy Spirit, and the lives of faithful Christians. We can also become so focused on efforts to re-create a previous encounter with Christ in our own personal lives that we fail to see where the Lord is calling us now. When we do that then we are like these women who return to a past experience of Jesus rather than learning to recognize Him present now in a new way.

Luke emphasizes throughout His Gospel that today is the day of our salvation, not yesterday. Today the scripture is being fulfilled in our midst — not yesterday or tomorrow (see Lk 4:21). Today is when we must pick up our Cross and follow Jesus — not yesterday or tomorrow (see Lk 9:23). For this reason the Liturgy of the Word on Easter Sunday invites us to sing the antiphon taken from Psalm 118:24 "*This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad.*" In this way, we are invited to celebrate the resurrection as a current event that is always relevant and significant for our lives as disciples.

*What are typical past experiences of Jesus that people can focus on in such a way that it prevents them from seeking Jesus in the present moment?*

*When do you find yourself looking for the living one among the dead and focusing on a past event (retreat experience or prayer experience) rather than recognizing Jesus as the one who lives in the present?*

*How do you seek the Living One present to you now?*

*When we search for Jesus where He is not present then we become frustrated and even doubtful. How can a faith community help people recognize Jesus (the one who lives) present in their lives today?*

The reprimand leads to a reminder as the women are challenged to remember the whole of Jesus' message including the necessity of His suffering, death, and subsequent glorification. That process of remembering Jesus' life and teaching transformed them and filled them with joy as they came to faith and believed in our Lord's word. They then understood the meaning of the empty tomb and the burial garments left behind. These things were remnants of the past and Jesus would never need them again because He will die no more.

The problem is that we can sometimes suffer from a selective memory of Jesus' words and teachings. Obviously the disciples had the same problem or they would have understood Jesus' words as did the women. When we are selective in our faith memory then we fail to embrace everything Jesus teaches and can focus on only those things we want to hear, are easy to follow or make sense to us. Sometimes we can even intentionally disregard parts of our Lord's teaching when it is particularly challenging or difficult to grasp. The women didn't understand what the empty tomb meant until they remembered Jesus teaching about "rising from the dead". Jesus' teaching interpreted their current situation and made them realize how much God was in control of all things.

It is important for us to remember that we cannot enter into the mystery of Jesus until we understand the message of Jesus. In Christian iconography this essential truth of faith is represented by the four Evangelists (Gospel writers) represented on the four points of a Crucifix since the Evangelists teach us the Christian Mystery that leads us to be united with Jesus in His suffering, death, and resurrection. If we have neglected part of the message, we have reduced our ability to enter into the mystery of our Lord. We can't remember what we don't know. One of the necessary steps of mature discipleship is to learn what Jesus said and did by studying the Gospels. Only then can we remember our Lord's words in the course of our daily lives so as to have a proper perspective on the situations we face.

*When has the teaching or lived example of Jesus helped you to understand your life in a new way?*

*How have you been transformed by remembering the life and message of Jesus in a challenging time?*

*When do people find it easy to focus on some things Jesus said and did but not on others?*

*What part of our Lord's message do people tend to focus on and accept?*

*What part of our Lord's message do people tend to disregard?*

The women then remembered His words, understood the reality of the resurrection, and took this message to the other disciples. In this action, the women became the first ones to announce the good news of the resurrection. These women were no newcomers to the ministry of Jesus. In Luke 8:1-3 we were told that there were some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities who followed Jesus. Among these were Mary Magdalene from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward. These two women are now present at the

resurrection along with Mary the mother of James and some others. These same women stood by Jesus in His crucifixion (see Lk 23:49) and witnessed His burial (see Lk 23:55).

Luke wants us to know that these women have been deeply immersed in the life and teachings of Jesus. They have been eyewitnesses of our Lord's actions throughout the Gospel. Now they are represented as becoming Ministers of the Word as they bring the fullness of the Gospel message to others by proclaiming the resurrection. For Luke, it is an important part of discipleship that eyewitnesses become Ministers of the World. Luke has already alluded to this necessary development in the very opening passages of His Gospel (see Lk 1:2).

We are called to imitate the example of the women and to become ministers of the word as well. We become eyewitnesses to Jesus when we recognize the active presence of Jesus in our lives. This is an awareness we can only have when we faithfully remember His words. Being a minister of the word means that we help others to understand the Christian mystery and to recognize Jesus, the One Who Lives, in their lives as well. It also means inviting others to enter into the Christian mystery by our attractive witness of discipleship. The women in this passage took initiative in bringing the message to others; they didn't wait until they were told to do so. The same should be true for us.

We are also told that the women in this passage "kept repeating" the message which indicates an ongoing effort. Thus, the women are not only witnesses but they have become missionaries who share the good news of the risen Jesus Christ to all whom they meet. So should we.

*How does the transition from being an "eyewitness" to becoming a "minister of the word" change the way you understand discipleship?*

*What can help you be a better eyewitness?*

*What opportunities do you have to be a minister of the word for others in your family, friends, or professional life?*

*Luke wants us to know that the same women who had previously been identified as suffering evil spirits and infirmities have now become the most courageous of missionaries. What temptations of unworthiness or unpreparedness can cause someone to dismiss the invitation to become a missionary of faith?*

One last note about this passage is the very frequent use of the word "tomb". A careful study of this section of Luke's Gospel indicates that the word tomb is used eight times (see Lk 23:53, 23:55, 24:1, 24:2, 24:9, 24:12, 24:22, 24:24). Luke is making a very significant statement by using the word tomb eight times in connection with the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The number Eight (8) was a symbolic way of referring to the day of resurrection as the day that initiates eternal life. You see, while Jesus was in the tomb over the course of only three calendar days as calculated in Hebrew chronology (Friday, Saturday, and Sunday), Jesus actually rose from the dead on the first day of a new week (see Lk 24:1). To call it the "first day" is most commonly understood as a reference to the original creation of the world and implies that the

resurrected life of Jesus initiates a new creation on a new first day. However, the use of the expression “first day” can also be misleading and imply that the resurrection takes place in ordinary time.

In the resurrection, Jesus is no longer bound by time or space. Our Lord has opened the door to the eternal day that never ends—that is why some Christians in the early Church referred to the day of resurrection more properly as the “Eighth Day” (or the first day of eternity) so as to distinguish it from ordinary days of the week. There is no ninth day. For this reason, the number eight is associated with the resurrection of Jesus and has become a symbol for Jesus Himself as the Eight Day incarnate. If you look at most baptisteries in Christian churches, you will notice that they commonly have eight sides to them. The symbolism of the number eight being associated with the experience of Baptism is even represented in the very building of the baptistry of Saint John Lateran in Rome (dating to the fifth century). The eight references to the tomb in these passages from Luke’s Gospel are telling us that our baptism is an immersion into the death and resurrection of Jesus and that we must enter into the tomb with Jesus in order to rise with Him as members of His body who share everlasting life. Saint Paul makes this clear in his teachings on Baptism and discipleship when he says that we must “die with Christ and be buried with him” (see Rom 6:3–5 and Col 2:2).

To phrase this teaching in a more poetic way, it could be said that the Tomb becomes the womb from which Disciples are born in the waters of Baptism.

*How does this understanding of the tomb as a symbol for baptism deepen your appreciation of this passage?*

*The tomb is the consistent symbol that connects Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection. In many ancient Christian churches the altar was actually represented as a tomb. What does that symbolism say about the Eucharist being the reality of our participation in the Paschal Mystery of Jesus and of His death and resurrection?*

*Being a disciple means that we die to ourselves so that it is Christ who lives in us. What aspects of your life are difficult to let go of so that Christ can live in you?*

*The women were transformed by their experience at the tomb of Jesus and they become missionaries as a result of it. How is our baptism meant to be an experience of transforming grace that makes us missionaries?*

*What can a faith community do to help people better understand the reality and significance of their baptism?*