

They Were There...

Easter Day

(From the Gospel: St. John xx. 1 ff.)

1 The first day of the week cometh Mary Magdalene early, when it was yet dark, unto the sepulchre, and seeth the stone taken away from the sepulchre. 2 Then she runneth, and cometh to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple, whom Jesus loved, and saith unto them, They have taken away the Lord out of the sepulchre, and we know not where they have laid him. 3 Peter therefore went forth, and that other disciple, and came to the sepulchre. 4 So they ran both together: and the other disciple did outrun Peter, and came first to the sepulchre. 5 And he stooping down, and looking in, saw the linen clothes lying; yet went he not in. 6 Then cometh Simon Peter following him, and went into the sepulchre, and seeth the linen clothes lie, 7 And the napkin, that was about his head, not lying with the linen clothes, but wrapped together in a place by itself. 8 Then went in also that other disciple, which came first to the sepulchre, and he saw, and believed. 9 For as yet they knew not the scripture, that he must rise again from the dead. 10 Then the disciples went away again unto their own home.

I want us to consider on this Easter morning what this whole series of events would have looked like from the standpoint of His beloved disciples and other followers. This wondrous tale has been told and retold so often that we are certainly tempted to take it for granted. But think of the advantage we possess from the standpoint of hindsight: we already know the last page of this book which for them was the greatest of all mysteries. The entire story is laid out for us in the clearest of terms, and has been placed squarely and conveniently in our laps in the form of Holy Scripture, carefully preserved and handed down by the Church for the use of every successive age.

But lest we become arrogant, and deride their apparent ignorance and or lack of faith or slowness of heart, we must remember that if they had not successfully passed the test of coming to grips with the incredible circumstances of Christ's life, death, and resurrection that faced them, we today would not be inheriting so easily what they had to come by through such difficulty. The fact that they persisted through the greatest series of enigmas men and women have ever faced, and came to faith and belief, is a victory not only for them but for all who have come afterward.

First, how would they possibly square the character and life of the Man Jesus, with whom they had lived for three years, observing His every move, intimately acquainted with His nature, knowing His goodness, purity, and holiness, with the awful events of His Passion that they had just witnessed? They were well acquainted with the principle that men get just what they deserve, a taunt that long before had been aimed at the righteous Job by his misguided friends. It was taken up once again by Christ's persecutors before Pilate when he sought to release Christ: *They answered and said unto [Pilate], If he were not a malefactor, we would not have delivered him up unto thee* (John 18:30), in other words: "Look at Him! There He is ...guilty! The fact that

He is here, condemned, is *a priori* evidence of his guilt.” But Jesus’ friends knew that their Lord merited not one single element of the incredible rush to judgment He was being subject to. Had they been able to equate even one of the Lord’s words, or actions, or teachings, with the storm of hatred which He now endured, perhaps the incongruity of what was taking place before them would have been lessened.

But harder for them to comprehend, much harder, would be that question one would hardly dare to form in the inner reaches of one’s own heart and mind: “Where is God in all this? Would God have turned His back upon His own Son, and consign Him to such wickedness and mistreatment?” What else could they have concluded? Jesus seemed to be utterly abandoned by God and man. Some among them would have heard His awful cry from the cross: *And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" that is, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"* (Mt. 27:46). Surely in the weeks that followed they contemplated the prophet Isaiah’s words that so graphically described this very scene: *we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted* (53:4b). In the pre-Easter dawn, they would have failed to reconcile such enormous contradictions. But there were others, as well.

They knew that Jesus was dead. They had seen the extent of His torments ever since His betrayal and arrest. Because they had some inkling of who Jesus was --divine, as well as human--, they knew that His suffering was not merely physical, but was also emotional and even spiritual in dimension, an experience far beyond the realm of what ordinary men might endure. Further, they would have had to concede that their own abandonment of Him was a significant part of the heartbreak that He was going through. They saw Him cruelly used and mistreated, and finally crucified. They saw the life ebb out of Him, the awful death of the cross. Lastly, they would have heard His last cry, and witnessed His death. The amount of space given in the Gospels to these events make it clear that His followers wanted to affirm with all the force of evidence that their Lord did *die*, and nothing less.

Since they knew without a doubt that He was dead, His resurrection comes as the most improbable of events, and the most reality-shattering Good News! “But,” we say, “Jesus told them over and over again that He was going to rise from the dead. Why should they act so surprised?” But with all due compassion for their circumstances, and considering the nature of what they had just witnessed, they were in no position to reason their way through things. They were at the mercy of their reactions, as we would have been. Had the circumstances been tamer, and more ordinary, and easier to come to terms with, perhaps the disciples would have been at greater leisure to consider all of the evidence, and perhaps even to have anticipated the outcome. But their Lord had suffered a protracted, violent death. And now both angelic and human witnesses were claiming that He was alive, having been resurrected from the dead.

These poor, very human friends of Jesus, having been taken to the very depths of disappointment and disillusionment, are suddenly catapulted to the highest heights! All that their senses have so graphically shown them over the recent past is now grandly overturned. Having just witnessed an event in history the likes of which will never be repeated --the spotless Lamb of God being sacrificed for the sins of the world; the focused hatred of their peers and respected leaders aimed improbably at the very One least deserving of it; the apparent triumph of evil over good-- their weak and trembling frames are now graced with a sight they would never have dared to hope for: their resurrected Lord.

Those disciples have become an example for us. The prophet Isaiah spoke long before of what must happen within human hearts for God to be in a position to erect that which alone bears the stamp of His work:

4 Every valley shall be exalted , and every mountain and hill shall be made low : and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: 5 And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed , and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it. (40:4)

God must prepare the ground. It must be leveled, it must be graded, it must be clear of every human device, before God can build upon it that which will last forever. Had not their experience been so extreme, had it not exceeded all reasonable bounds and entered into a realm totally beyond not only anything they had ever known, but beyond ours and all others as well, we and all the rest of the church would not be rejoicing as we do this Easter morning. This is the way God always works with men. It can never be anything less.

Soon His followers would enter yet another phase of previously unknown dimension, as they tarried together in an upper room, awaiting the promised coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

As we celebrated our Lord's victory over the grave today, let us also thank Him for those whose faith and perseverance is the very foundation upon which the Church is built!

Let us pray:

"O God, as we remember that little band of believers who endured first-hand the great trial of our Lord's Passion, who overcame their fear in order to treat His broken and bruised body with dignity and respect, and who were the first to greet His great resurrection with joy and acclaim, and so became forerunners for us all, grant that we might follow in their footsteps and imitate their example. This we pray through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.