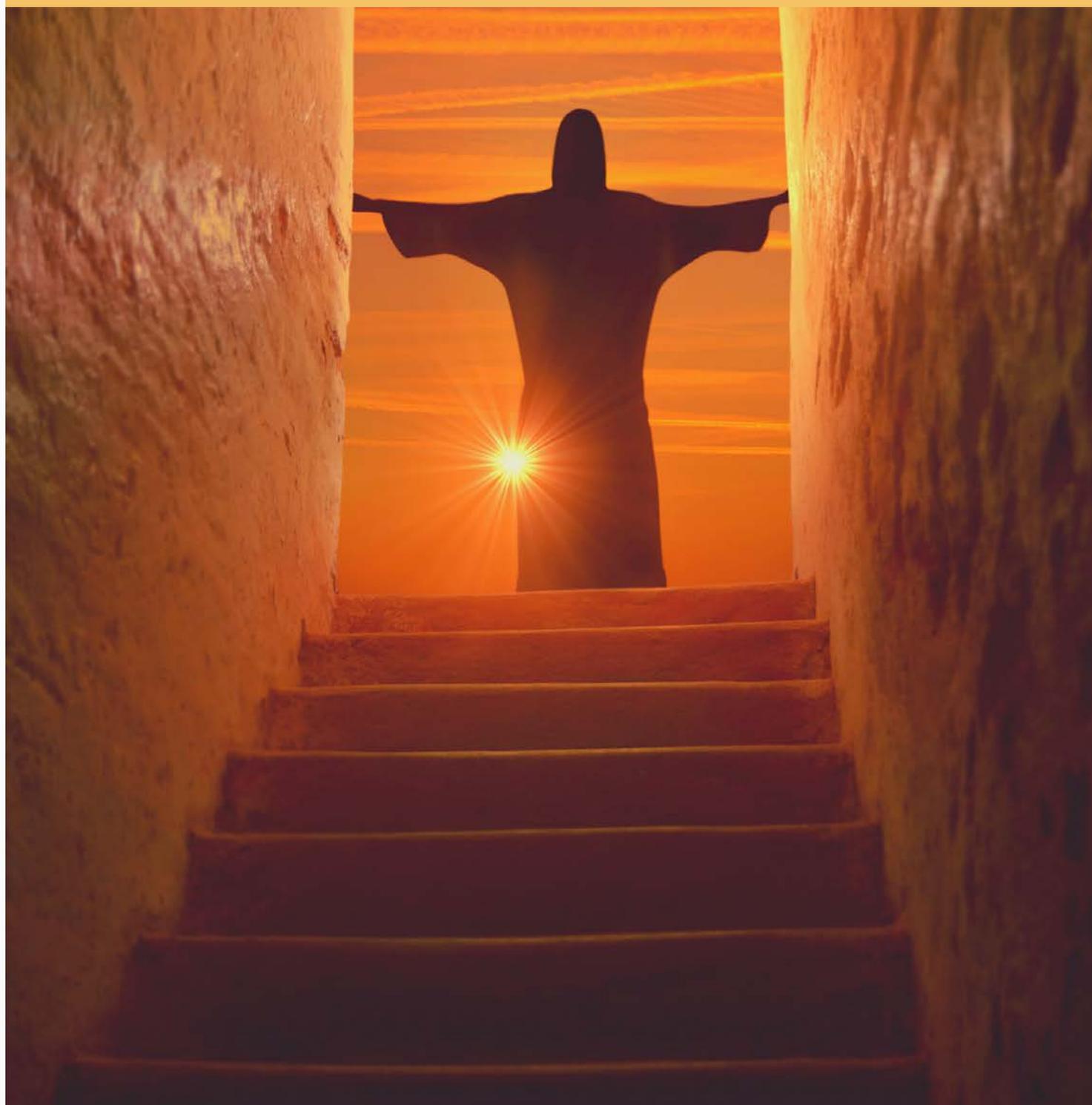


# ALLELUIA HE IS RISEN!

VICARIATE FOR FAITH & MISSION



RC DIOCESE OF HEXHAM AND NEWCASTLE

# Reflections on the Readings for Easter Week 2020

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I am constantly irritated by the fact that, for a number of years now, the secular world always refers to Holy Week as "Easter Week." It is probably a symptom of the avoidance of all uncomfortable 'realities' like suffering and death in our society. Until the recent crisis all of this has been carefully swept under the carpet, safely out of sight. Not anymore, however, what is happening at the moment is all too obviously in the public domain. As Christians, even in the midst of the crisis, we have celebrated Holy Week, and now, however difficult we may find it this year, we really do come to "Easter Week" as we welcome Jesus risen from the dead, and the hope for all humankind that this brings.

Throughout this Easter Season our First Reading - on Sundays as well as weekdays - is always taken from the Acts of the Apostles: St Luke's account of the earliest days of the Christian Community. For this Season the Old (Hebrew) Testament is laid to one side (our usual source for the First Readings on Sundays).

There are very few accounts of the events after Jesus' death on the Cross. These accounts consist of two distinct themes: the Empty Tomb and Stories of Appearances of the Risen Lord. In fact, by and large, we exhaust the supply of these stories during Easter Week itself.

### **Easter Sunday – (Acts 10:34, 37-43, Col. 3:1-4, Jn. 20:1-9)**

Our First Reading recounts Peter visiting the house of a pagan soldier called Cornelius. At first the disciples assumed that the call to follow the Risen Lord was for fellow Jews only. It soon became apparent, however, that the message was for all people without exception: Jew and Pagan alike. This was a difficult idea for Peter to take on board. In the lead up to this visit to Cornelius he had resisted and very much doubted the call that he had received to go to Caesarea to a pagan household. He is convinced of the truthfulness of the call, however, in a dream he has the day before this visit.

St Paul, of course, never met Jesus during his earthly life. It is the Risen Christ that he met on the Road to Damascus and who forms the central part of the message he preaches on his various missionary journeys. Today we hear from the letter he wrote to the Colossians urging them, now that they have been "brought back to true life with Christ" to let go of everything that held them back from fully embracing this new reality. Although now "hidden" that new life will be revealed in due course.

All four Gospels agree that Mary Magdalene (of Magdala as St John calls her) was the first to witness the Empty Tomb and, later, to meet the Risen Lord. In ancient times she was called "the Apostle of the Apostles" (the one sent to tell the Good News to those whom Jesus sent out to proclaim that same message). Peter and the 'other disciple' (usually taken to be St John himself) dash off to verify what Mary has told them. On seeing the Empty Tomb and the cloths that lay there St John tells us, "He saw, and he believed." This is the goal of all of Jesus' preaching and teaching in this Gospel: calling people to belief and thus to the new life promised in the Resurrection. Today we can share that same faith and hope with people who, even more than usual, need that hope now!

## Easter Monday (Acts 2:14, 22-33; Mt. 28:8-15)

It is hardly surprising given the momentous event of Jesus' Resurrection that there is some confusion over exactly what happened next. Although St Luke has the disciples stay in Jerusalem in the coming days, St Matthew records here an instruction of Jesus to the women, who had come to the tomb, that they should tell the disciples to go to Galilee where he would meet them. (St John records appearances in both Jerusalem and Galilee, as we shall see.) Eager as ever to counteract any accusations made by the Jewish authorities at the time he was writing his Gospel, Matthew adds the story of the bribe paid by the chief priests to the soldiers to keep quiet about what had happened. They were to tell people that some disciples of Jesus had come and stolen his body.

We go back to the beginning of the preaching ministry of the Apostles today in our First Reading. Peter is speaking on Pentecost Day. According to St Luke the disciples had been holed up in the "Upper Room" for fifty days by now, "for fear of the Jews". Jesus had appeared to them on a number of occasions but now he has ascended into heaven. Suddenly they are emboldened to burst out of the Upper Room to address the crowd. We are told that Peter spoke "in a loud voice". Full of confidence he outlines what has happened to Jesus and how he is now risen, vindicated in all that he had said and done. The change from cowering in a locked room to proclaim boldly the message of the Good News is a result of the coming of the Holy Spirit on them. That same Spirit can embolden us in these difficult days. One day, hopefully before too long, we too will be able to move out of our "locked rooms" and proclaim Jesus risen from the dead ourselves!

## Easter Tuesday (Acts 2:36-41; Jn. 20:11-18)

Peter's words on the Day of Pentecost move the crowd to ask, "What must we do, brothers?" The reply is much the same as Jesus' own call from the beginning of his ministry: to repent. They are to have a change of mind and heart, become different people by realising that Jesus, "whom you crucified is both Lord and Christ." Such a conversion is to have a profound effect on their lives and their attitude to life. It is a call made to us also. Things will be different in the time ahead and, please God, they will more like the kind of life that Jesus calls all people to lead.

Our Gospel today is the famous story of Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene in the Garden shortly after the two disciples had rushed off back to their companions in the Upper Room. It has inspired many artists to try to depict the scene. Perhaps the best known is that of Titian entitled "Noli me Tangere". A direct translation would read, "Don't touch me." There is, however, another way of expressing these same words that has greater meaning for both Mary and for us today, "Don't cling on to me." Mary has to let go of the Jesus she knew, but then tell others about him so that they too can come to know the Lord who is now risen. We too are asked not to cling to false, naive images of Jesus and to proclaim the Jesus who reveals himself in the Gospels.



## Easter Wednesday (Acts 3:1-10; Lk. 24:13-35)

At first, and for some time afterwards, the disciples considered themselves fully part of the Jewish faith to which they all belonged. As the story of the early community moves on we find Peter and John going to the Temple for the daily afternoon prayers. The cure of a disabled man recounted today has many similarities with the cures performed by Jesus himself. The similarities here, and throughout the Acts of the Apostles are both conscious and deliberate: what the disciples are engaged in is a continuation of Jesus' own ministry. "Jesus Christ the Nazarene" is now proclaimed at the very centre of the Jewish faith – something that has consequences as we will hear over the coming days.

Our Gospel today recounts one of the most famous Resurrection stories: the two disciples on the Road to Emmaus. Such is the power of this story that it is ripe for the kind of meditation that calls us to place ourselves in the shoes of those two disciples: to be those disciples on their journey where they meet Jesus and talk to him. There is no substitute for such a meditation because nothing quite has the power to speak to our own lives today than using our imagination to hear those words of Jesus spoken to **ME**. One thought, however, may help us at this time: the disciples were running away, they were going in the wrong direction. In what direction am I going these days?



## Easter Thursday (Acts 3:11-26; Lk. 24:35-48)

Both Readings follow on directly from the passages offered yesterday. In the First Reading we hear that a crowd gathers in the Temple on hearing that Peter and John had cured a crippled man. Peter uses it as another opportunity to preach about Jesus. Naturally, in the setting of the Temple, Peter emphasises that it is through the power of the God of Jesus, himself fully rooted in the Jewish tradition from Abraham onwards, that the man is now able to walk. He talks about the events that brought Jesus to his death but exonerates the current audience of all blame. Nonetheless, they are called to repent of their old ways and listen to Jesus' message.

In the Gospel the two disciples who had met Jesus on the Road to Emmaus have returned to Jerusalem to tell the others what happened to them. Now Jesus himself appears among them and shows that he is no ghost. He goes on to explain that everything written in "the Law of Moses, in the Prophets, and in the Psalms" (a long-winded way of saying "The Old Testament") was pointing towards his coming and that he is the fulfilment of the hopes expressed in those writings. We are told, "He opened their minds to understand the scriptures". Once understood their task is to take this Good News "to all the nations". That same task is now ours today – the people Pope Francis calls "missionary disciples" – and the message of the Risen Lord has never been more needed than it is at this moment!

### **Easter Friday (Acts 4:1-12; Jn. 21:1-14)**

Not only has the coming of the Holy Spirit emboldened the disciples to preach about Jesus openly in the Temple, today Peter is even able to speak out in front of the highest court of the Jewish Religion – the Sanhedrin (“the rulers, elders and scribes”). He pulls no punches. In our extract yesterday he exonerated the crowd of all blame. But now he lays it firmly at the door of the leaders of the people, “Jesus Christ the Nazarene, the one you crucified!” Their witness is clear, “For all the names in the world given to men, this is the only one by which we can be saved.” There is no tougher talking than this, and we hear about the consequences of these words in the First Reading tomorrow.

The Gospel gives us another notable appearance of the Risen Lord to the apostles – this time in Galilee. Although St Luke has an account of a miraculous catch of fish at the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, when he calls Simon Peter and the others to leave their nets and to follow him, here St John gives a very similar story, set after the Resurrection. The catch of fish is immense. The power of the Risen Lord is capable of fulfilling all our needs. This is the message we are called on to take on board today.

### **Easter Saturday (Acts 4:13-21; Mk. 16:9-15)**

The Jewish council of the Sanhedrin is at a loss to know what to do with Peter and John, so they tell them to stop preaching about Jesus. This makes Peter even bolder, “You must judge whether in God’s eyes it is right to listen to you and not to God!” The Jewish Council consists of the very people who claim to speak on God’s behalf, but nothing further is demanded of Peter and John, at this stage. We will hear of more dealings with these same people in the coming days.

The oldest manuscripts of St Mark’s Gospel end very abruptly at verse 8 of chapter 16. He simply tells his readers about the Empty Tomb. The verses in our Gospel today are thought to be a later addition to the Gospel, intended to give it a more complete ending. They simply list some of the Appearance Stories in the other Gospels and end with one that we come to later on in the Easter Season: the command to the Eleven to, “Go out to the whole world; proclaim the Good News!” The call to mission that belongs to us all.

