

Let the Risen One Easter in us



Sister Patty Fawkner SGS. Image: Sisters of the Good Samaritan.

The resurrection wasn't a once-off event, simply about Jesus. It was and continues to be an explosion of light, love and new life for all humanity, writes Patty Fawkner SGS.

Whenever I read or hear the passage from John's Gospel relaying the events of that first Easter morning, the image that comes to mind is Eugène Burnand's famous painting of Peter and the Beloved Disciple racing to the tomb. They've just been told by Mary Magdalen that Jesus' body has been taken out of the tomb, and they're up and off. Perhaps you're familiar with this painting.



Apostles Peter and John hurry to the tomb on the morning of the Resurrection, Eugène Burnand (1898), Wikimedia.

Many years ago, I saw this painting in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris. Rather than "saw", I was arrested by the painting. Burnand captures the speed of the disciples with their flowing hair and cloaks. Depth of emotion is etched on their faces and even their hands. Everything speaks of urgency, anxiety and earnestness. What will they find, who will they see?

They find an empty tomb and linen burial cloths on the ground, and a neatly rolled up head cloth.

For the evangelist John, this is not a monumental letdown. For him, this scene is more significant than any vision of angels we read about in the synoptic resurrection accounts.

Not one of the evangelists tries to describe the indescribable event of the moment of Jesus' resurrection. Pope Benedict XVI gave it a go when he described resurrection as "an explosion of light, a cosmic event linking heaven and earth." All we get from John in this first resurrection story is an empty tomb and linen cloths that have touched death.

It occurred to me that each of us have "empty tomb and linen cloth" experiences throughout our lives.

I had such an experience when my father died in his 50s. Nothing prepared me for the grief into which I was plunged. Naively, so very naively, I had thought that my faith would somehow shield me from the ache of the loss I experienced. Well-meaning, often overly trite, pious words of comfort really didn't comfort. The word "loss" had never seemed so real. My darling Dad, who was once there, was no longer. My experience was that of emptiness and I felt no sense of God's presence, let alone comfort.

Months later I decided to go on a weekend retreat with my spiritual director, a wise old Benedictine monk. I shared with him my grief. He listened, allowed me to weep, then gently suggested that I reflect on the Gospel passage immediately following today's Gospel. You know the story. Mary Magdalen comes back to the empty tomb. Weeping, she encounters a person whom she takes for the gardener. He calls her by her name and she knows that it is Jesus the Christ, the Risen One.

As I stayed with this passage, with Mary in the garden, I felt something stirring within me. It wasn't cataclysmic, but a slowly dawning awareness of a presence in the emptiness, a sense that God wasn't going to take away my pain but that God was with me in my pain, that God shared my pain and loss.

My grief stayed with me, but I was comforted by presence within absence.

And I did find comfort in the words of St John Chrysostom who reminded me that "those whom we love and lose are no longer where they were before. They are now wherever we are." My father's life had changed, but had not ended.

Is not this what the beloved disciple experienced while standing within that empty tomb. "He saw and he believed," the evangelist says. He saw emptiness and he encountered presence.

This reminds us that belief, faith, is never a cerebral activity.

Faith is not a series of propositions to be rattled off and defended. Faith, belief, is a relationship.

The British theologian, James Alison describes faith as "relaxing into the embrace of the one who likes you." I love this. Alison doesn't talk about obligatory or dutiful love. He talks about relational liking—a relationship that is intimate, tender and affectionate.

This Gospel is indeed good news. Jesus is the Christ, the Risen One, the one whose presence is in every empty, death-dealing, painful, grief-stricken aspect of our lives. At some level for all of us, the coronavirus pandemic has been an empty tomb/linen cloth experience. And haven't we been heartened, encouraged and given resurrection hope by the self-sacrificing response of medical professionals, cleaners, scientists, teachers, those who care for those in quarantine, family members and loved ones? An explosion of chaos and suffering has evoked an explosion of love and heroism.

Pope Francis says that "we proclaim the resurrection of Christ when his light illuminates the dark moments of our existence, and we are able share it with others; when we know when to smile with those who smile, and weep with those who weep; when we accompany those who are sad and at

risk of losing hope; when we recount our experience of Faith to those who are searching for meaning and happiness.” When we do so, Francis says, our attitude, our witness, our life all say, “Jesus is risen.”

How like these disciples on Easter morn, we are!

I am like Mary Magdalen who wanted to cling to the Risen One. I wanted to cling to an idea of God who would shield me from human grief.

I had to let go of that image of God and find God’s presence in emptiness and pain. We have always, in the words of the spiritual guide, Anthony de Mello, “to empty out our teacup God,” again and again and, yet again.

We also need to empty out our petty understanding of Easter. The resurrection wasn’t a once-off event, simply about Jesus. It was and continues to be an explosion of light, love and new life for all of us, for all humanity, for all history.

“Let Him easter in us, be a dayspring to the dimness of us,” says poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. Let the Risen One easter in us, we who are truly beloved disciples, joy-filled, hope-filled disciples, not despite empty tombs and linen cloths, but because of that empty tomb on that first Easter morn.

This column was first published as the homily for Easter Sunday in the Australian Women Preach podcast series. Click [here](#) to listen to the podcast or visit australianwomenpreach.com.au.

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