

Resurrexit, sicut dixit, Alleluia!

It may have gone unnoticed, but this morning we have already heard a sermon. Given by St Peter in the First Reading. A memorable sermon, because it was the first time Peter preached to non-Jews, his first proclamation of the Risen Lord Jesus to the wider world. A timeless sermon because it is heard every Easter morning at Mass. At its heart, Peter's message is very simple: that Jesus of Nazareth truly lived among us; that he was put to death by human hands; but that God raised him up, and the apostles stand as witnesses to that reality. The takeaway for the Gentile congregation hearing Peter speak that day is that Jesus is now Lord of all, judge of the living and the dead, and through him, Peter says, forgiveness of sins is offered to everyone who believes.

While St Peter gives us a sermon this morning, St Paul provides a Pastoral Letter, as our bishops occasionally do. In those four verses from the Epistle to the Colossians, Paul asks *if you have been raised with Christ?* If we are baptised then yes we have been reborn in Him. Therefore, *seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.* Although we left our homes this Easter morning setting off for Downside, St Paul gently insists: not downside, nor upside, but Christ's side, *seated at the right hand of God.* This means more than merely trying to stay positive, keeping our pecker up, but to lift our minds and hearts to where the Risen Christ is – towards the light, away from the darkness. The Resurrection is a new direction for us, a call to live upwards, to measure our lives by what is eternal, where Christ is already drawing us.

Belief in the resurrection might seem unlikely. Some call our faith a leap into the dark, but Peter and Paul lived and died by it. Some would say faith is a suspension of rationality or understanding in favour of something supernatural. But that is not how Peter, Paul and the first Christians spoke, and it is not how the Church speaks today. St Peter says *we are witnesses* to the claim that the resurrection really happened in history. The evidence is compelling. Jesus lived, was crucified, and was raised from the dead. The apostles point to their own testimony, and as St Paul later reminds the doubting Corinthians, to the five hundred witnesses who saw the risen Christ. Early apostolic preaching invites their hearers to check the evidence. The whole of Christianity stands or falls on this one fact. As Paul says, *if Christ has not been raised, your faith is in vain.*

This Easter Sunday, I don't suggest blind faith, making a leap in the dark; but instead that we do take the plunge. Like at our baptism. If we take the plunge, in the holy water, we are buried with Christ so that we may rise again to life with him. Recalling our baptism, in a few minutes we will be asked to make our profession of faith: *Do you believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was born of the Virgin Mary, suffered death and was buried, rose again from the dead, and is seated at the right hand of the Father?*

At the end of the gospel, enveloped by an empty grave, Peter and John looked away from the darkness to the light, now believing what Jesus had told them so many times, that he would rise from the dead. The last line reads: *they did not yet understand the Scripture that he had to rise from the dead*. Nobody - not Mary Magdalene, Peter, John, nobody – could believe it was possible that Jesus would literally rise from the dead. They thought he must have meant something symbolic and spiritual, not something literal. Doubting Thomas would not believe the others even when they swore that they had literally seen the resurrected Christ, until he himself had touched Christ's wounds with his own hands. That's how literal the Resurrection was. When Mary arrived at the tomb, she saw that the stone was rolled away. How? Who moved the stone? Neither the Jews nor the Romans would have moved it, because they both wanted rid of Jesus. The tomb was guarded by armed Roman soldiers, so the disciples could not have done it. Not to mention that the disciples were later willing to face martyrdom for the truth of the resurrection.

What Peter and John see, what helps them to believe, is not just an empty tomb but the grave clothes neatly folded away; both the shroud that wrapped the body and the face cloth. We have both of these linen cloths today: the Shroud at Turin, and the *sudarium*, the face cloth, at Manoppello in Italy; they have both withstood secular, scientific analysis. The outline of Christ's body and face is on them. John who also wrote today's gospel account says: *he saw and believed*. He hadn't believed until he saw. John sees himself as not much better than Doubting Thomas. When Thomas believed (as we'll hear next Sunday), Jesus then responded, *Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed*. That's us. Jesus is pronouncing a blessing on our faith. Dear brothers and sisters, accept that blessing. Your faith was both your free choice and a gift of God. Like Peter and John, we understand only after we believe. Faith is not a leap in the dark. It is a leap in the light. We've taken the plunge in baptism. Now, follow Mary, John and Peter into the empty tomb. This Easter, die to sin, rise with Christ, and make a leap into the light.