

Easter Sunday

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*Encountering the Risen Christ*

I was stunned when I first heard that the Cathedral of Notre-Dame was up in flames. And, on of all days, Monday in Holy Week. I was moved by the images and videos of people of different faiths, and those with no particular faith, gathered outside the cathedral singing hymns during the height of the blaze, uncertain of whether it would be completely destroyed. And on the following day when we learned that the Cathedral was still standing, I was equally moved by images of the charred interior, especially the depiction of the shining, gold cross surrounded by smoldering rubble. As I looked more closely, I realized that the statue beneath the cross depicted Mary holding the lifeless body of her son. That intimate, painful moment between a parent and her child becoming again a sign of hope and redemption. I thought about all those pilgrims who had gathered in this sacred place over the centuries. Lighting candles, dropping to their knees in prayer, standing in awe of her majestic beauty. Their collective pain and hope had been born out of very personal experiences in this house of prayer.

I was reminded of this profound truth in the aftermath of Notre-Dame's blaze as well as in my own encounters throughout the week. My custom during Holy Week is to focus as much of my time and attention on preparing for the beautiful services in which we participate as a community. But this particular one, I was also gifted with many quiet, intimate moments in which I was drawn deeper into God's transformative love. Anointing a parishioner at the hospital; walking the stations of the cross with two fellow worshippers in the evening glow of a quiet sanctuary; taking part in the ritual of the foot washing in someone's home; witnessing the pain of another and pausing to share in that burden with them; sitting at the foot of the cross with a child, talking about how we were sad that Jesus had died, being taught by this young one of our need during this holy time to pray for Jesus and not just pray to Jesus. And finally blessing the food of a friend that she would prepare lovingly for her family on Easter Sunday, an old tradition that until this invitation I had never participated in.

Much of the drama of Holy Week takes place in a public setting. Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem, his trial, and execution, and even the Last Supper were all communal acts. Only in the garden before his arrest do we find him gathered with a few of his closest companions. These agonizing moments are mirrored in the predawn hours of Easter morning when Mary Magdalene comes to another garden, weighed down by her own solitary grief. The two major occasions which we Christians mark with our elaborate celebrations are acts that few people witnessed. In solitude and in darkness Jesus was born among us and reborn for us. The only fanfare was found in otherworldly messengers proclaiming his birth and resurrection among frightened and confused humans. In out of the way places and among ordinary folk, God did something extraordinary. If it weren't for Mary and Peter and Philip, and all those other flawed and frightened people like you and me who encountered the Risen Christ and the power of his love, we would not be here. We would not be here proclaiming our Easter acclamations.

Essayist Debie Thomas puts it this way: "What I see in the resurrection narratives are individual people having profoundly individual encounters with Christ. The encounters don't look identical. When Peter sees the empty tomb, he runs away. When the beloved disciple sees it, he believes without comprehension. When Mary sees it, she weeps and waits for more. In other words, we come to the empty tomb as ourselves, for good or for ill. We don't shed our baggage ahead of time; it barges in with us and shapes our perceptions and conclusions. What matters, then, is encountering the risen Jesus in the particulars of our own messy lives. Whatever universal claims we make as Christians must begin in the rich, fertile ground of our own stories. Whatever acclamations we cry out on Easter Sunday must begin with a willingness to linger in the garden, listening for the sounds of our own names, spoken in love. For our testimonies to ring true, they must originate in radical, intimate encounter.

This type of witness isn't automatic or easy," Thomas goes on to say. "It requires risk — the risk of hanging on to hope when all else fails. The risk of sitting in the dark after everyone else runs away. The risk of turning towards the one who calls our name and recognizing him for the savior he is. Often, it's only in retrospect, only as I look back at the 'gravesides' of my life, that I see salvation. 'Poet R.S. Thomas describes the process this way in his poem, "'The Answer": There have been times/when, after long on my

knees/ in a cold chancel, a stone has rolled/ from my mind, and I have looked/ in and seen the old questions lie/ folded and in a place/ by themselves, like the piled/ graveclothes of love's risen body.'"

The question asked of us on this Easter morning is not, "Do you believe in the doctrine of the resurrection?" but rather, 'How have you encountered the risen Christ?'" How are you bearing witness to this good news, in the particularity of your own life, so that others may recognize Jesus' voice calling them by name? So that friend and stranger alike can trust that they too are being upheld in that great love which not even death can destroy. If, God forbid, Notre-Dame had burned to the ground, no gleaming cross rising out of its ashes for us to behold, all would *not* have been lost. For in the hearts, faces and voices of those we witnessed as the fire raged on, the embers of their collective hope would have kindled a new creation. After all, glass, wood and stone, are there to point us always beyond what we can see to the beautiful mystery of our faith: that it is in the courage of God's beloved people sharing Christ's transformative love with one another where new life emerges from the grave. "*Alleluia! Christ is risen.*" And the people of God respond, "*He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*" Amen.