

**This Sunday's Readings – Easter Sunday** – Today we celebrate the holiest of all the religious holidays, Easter, when we celebrate the Resurrection of Our Lord, Jesus. Easter season lasts for 50 days and culminates on Pentecost Sunday. The joy of Easter can best be summed up in today's responsorial psalm, from Psalm 118, verse 24 – “This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice in it and be glad”. Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* explains the importance of Easter Season – “The Easter Sunday Mass is not itself the paschal liturgy. That took place at the culmination of the Easter Vigil. Rather, this is the first of a series of Masses that belong to the great fifty days. In them we reflect upon the post-Easter revelations of the risen Christ and the fruits of our redemption in him. The readings are the same every year”.

Today's first reading, as it will be throughout the Easter season, is from the Acts of the Apostles. The Acts were written by Luke, who also wrote the Gospel, and is really volume 2 of the life of Christ and the early Church. It was written sometime during the mid 80's AD. This particular reading, which is very uplifting, summarizes, very succinctly, the life of Jesus. What is even more important is that it was given to Gentiles. Up until this time Peter and the Apostles believed that only the Jews could be baptized. Then Paul came who would become the Apostle to the Gentiles. However Peter and the Apostles needed to accept Gentiles into the Christian community. (Luke's message of universality) Cornelius, a Roman centurion, who was “devout and God fearing along with his whole household” had a vision in which he was instructed to summon Peter. Peter's speech is a summary of the gospel story. After Peter's speech, the Holy Spirit descended upon Cornelius and his household and they began “speaking in tongues and glorifying God”. Peter then realized that the Gentiles could not be denied baptism and Cornelius and his household were baptized. It is also the testimony of the apostles as actual witnesses to the events of Jesus life and most especially His resurrection, which we celebrated last evening at the Easter Vigil. This theme of testimony and faith carries into today's Gospel reading. Please take a few short minutes to read chapter 10 of the Acts of the Apostles.

The Gospel reading is from John and is an account of our Lord's resurrection, but not as we might expect. It is interesting to note that it was a woman, Mary Magdalene, who was the first to discover the empty tomb and not one of the apostles. Both Matthew and Mark also name Mary as the first to the tomb, while Luke only mentions women. Only John has the story of the foot race between Peter and the “beloved disciple”, which Peter loses. But why doesn't the “beloved disciple” enter the tomb first? Most probably, it is out of respect that Peter is the leader, that he waits for Peter to enter the tomb first. This testimony is really based on faith and the belief that Jesus did rise from the dead. However, only the “beloved disciple” believes when he sees the empty tomb. Yet all three of them, Mary, Peter, and John (note that John's name is not specifically mentioned, but only as the one “whom Jesus loved”) did not fully understand the scriptures – “For they did not yet understand the Scriptures, that He had to rise from the dead”. Please read the following Old Testament references to Jesus' resurrection: Ps. 16:10, Hosea 6:2, and Jonah 2:1-2,11. That understanding would come shortly via Jesus appearances to His apostles and finally by the descent of the Holy Spirit upon them on Pentecost.

Faith played an integral role in all of these readings. How do we define faith? Is there a difference between our Western definition of faith and the Mediterranean definition of faith? John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle B* explains – “Commentators have long puzzled over the evangelist's parenthetical comment: “In 1984 the Boston College biblical scholar, PHEME PERKINS, wrote. “The theological task of articulating the significance of resurrection for twentieth-century Christians still remains to be undertaken” (*Resurrection*, Doubleday, p. 30). Despite her own and many fine publications since then, her judgment still stands. The grossly inaccurate discussion of this topic by journalists in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *US News and World Report* at Easter time in 1995 suggested that even as scholars increasingly make their research available to the public, the message still needs to be more clearly articulated. Scholars are agreed that Jesus' resurrection is *not* at all a miraculous return from the dead or something like a neardeath experience. The real differences in the reports and interpretations of the evangelists and other New Testament authors make it quite clear that there is *no, single, unified picture* of resurrection in the tradition. From this perspective, it is very significant that the gospel passage assigned for this great feast of Easter, [John 20:1-9](#), is the story of the finding of the *empty tomb*! None of the resurrection appearances of Jesus was selected. One purpose of the empty-tomb tradition is to remind believers that faith comes from hearing. John's report that the Beloved Disciple “sees” (the empty tomb and folded wrappings) and “believes” (that Jesus has been raised rather than that his corpse has been stolen) seems to replace the angelic proclamation in other accounts that “the Lord is risen!” Mary Magdalene represents the community grieving over Jesus' death and needing consolation. Her report that “they” have stolen the body very likely refers to enemies of Jesus but could also reflect the community's concern about the charge that some *Messianists* stole the body to support their tale that Jesus was raised from the dead. The early Peter tradition is of no help because, according to that report, he came to the tomb, found it empty, and returned to his friends without any understanding of what had happened ([Luke 24:12](#)). In John's report Peter enters the empty tomb first, and then the Beloved Disciple's reaction interprets what they both saw. In this gospel passage, faith in the resurrection of Jesus developed from the discovery of an empty tomb and not from an appearance of Jesus. It developed from what the first believers reported and how they interpreted what they experienced”.

Let's put ourselves in Mary's, Peter's, and John's shoes that Easter Sunday morning 2000 years ago. What would your reaction be to seeing that empty tomb? I invite everyone to take a few minutes and reflect upon that question.

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