

From the Homily Library of Fr. Callistus Iyorembor

Easter Sunday - Year B – April 4, 2021

Empty Tomb

Happy and blessed Easter to everyone. Our long season of Lent is now over; I hope your Lenten practices have been very fruitful. Last year we could not gather because of all the restrictions. We are indeed very thankful to God who has made it possible for us to celebrate Easter this year. As you know, Easter is the most important season in the entire liturgical year.

Notice how our Gospel passage for today opens with the words *“On the first day of the week Mary of Magdala came to the tomb early in the morning.”*

I am sure everyone of us can identify with the grave, a tomb; we may have witnessed a burial, or visited the grave of a loved one. As priest, I have the opportunity of actually presiding at burial ceremonies all the time. When I go to those sites - besides identifying with the family of the deceased - one of the significant things I do is to say a prayer over the grave and sprinkle holy water. Then I offer prayers that the deceased might rest here in peace.

Sometimes people visit graves of famous people. It offers a sense of history, sense of connection. It honors their memories, pays tribute to them. One time I was visiting my priest friends in Atlanta and we decided to visit the grave of Martin Luther King. One other time I visited Detroit. I remember vividly it was during my Thanksgiving break from school. We visited and prayed at the grave of Fr. Casey Solanus who was being considered for canonization.

The most profound experience for me was my visit to the actual place of Jesus’s burial in Jerusalem. Today, as you know, this site is the Church of The Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, the place where Jesus’ body was anointed before burial and - most importantly - where He was buried. Because my friends and I wanted to have the full experience of our visit to the Holy Land, we asked the attendants to let us spend the night in prayer in the place believed to be the actual tomb of Jesus.

Well, this grave of Jesus is at the center of our story today. We hear the women went to the grave of Jesus to anoint His body. According to Jewish custom, they were worried about who would roll away the stone. To their surprise, they found the stone was already rolled away. They thought a grave robber was at work. Their surprise increases as they look inside and see a young man wearing a white garment who says to them, *“Are you looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified? He has been raised from the dead; He is not here. Look, there is the place where they laid Him.”* The young man’s message - to put it more clearly - was not that someone had broken *into* this grave but rather someone had broken *out* of this grave.

What Mary Magdalene experienced was an empty tomb. This is precisely what Easter is! We are celebrating the Empty Tomb - The Resurrection.

What are our Easter lessons?

Though this physical world of time/space created by God is very good; there is another world beyond this one which is our final horizon. We anticipate the beatific vision, *“a new heaven and a new earth.”* The Resurrection is an indication of that great truth. We must live lives in anticipation of coming before God.

The way of hope is open to everybody. Why do I say this? Think of the cross. We did an intense reflection on Good Friday. We said it was the worst instrument of torture: death in agony, nakedness, shame, betrayal. Jesus even felt abandoned by God; *“My God My God why have you forsaken me?”* Imagine, a Mother watching her Son being tortured. That was the Virgin Mary’s experience. What appeared to be a great loss actually turned into the most glorious triumph ever known - empty tomb/ Resurrection. This shows that God’s ways are so far above our own ways. From the prophet Isaiah, *“My ways are not your ways; neither are My thoughts your thoughts.”*

So, it is with our lives. Easter is a reminder to us that even those things which seem to be the worst of tragedies are not always what they seem. Rom 8; 28 *"All things work together for good for those who love God."*

The message of Easter is clear. It's a message of HOPE. Not hope in a worldly sense, rather, it's the message of DIVINE HOPE and trust in God's perfect plan. Hope in the fact that God always has a greater purpose. Hope in the fact that God uses suffering and, in this case, death is a powerful instrument of salvation.

Let the power of the Resurrection resonate in your own heart. Announce it to everyone with whom you come in contact. Happy Easter.