

April 5, 2015 (Easter Sunday) Acts10:34-43 1Cor.15:1-11 Jn.20:1-18

Let us pray: Lord of the living and the dead, as we celebrate your resurrection and our new lives risen in you, open our eyes to see and believe you and your love for all, so that we can see you on the face of all around us so as to celebrate life. Amen.

Happy Easter! As we celebrate Christ' resurrection, we also give thanks for new life because of Easter. This is especially evident amongst us with baptism in our midst at our earlier Service today in Mandarin. This hopefully is also evident to our children and other young people who participant in Easter egg-hunt today in the parish, whether through hunting or setting up for the hunts.

That's right! Some people tend to see eggs as eggs only, while reality is: chickens do come out of fertilized eggs. This is simply natural law ordained by God. Likewise, non-believers tend to look at baptism as a religious ritual, while reality is: through baptism we come out as children of God with our lives renewed by Christ. Most of us here have experienced it, and one of our new sisters in Christ joins us in that regard today.

For that matter, we are just joining apostles and followers of Christ like St. Peter, John, Paul and Mary Magdalene in this regard. And in the 2,000 years between us and them, there're myriads of followers of Christ witnessing to that too.

All these may sound a bit too theological or even dogmatic as you hear me alluding. Yet, we know that it's a totally different experience when such personal encounter with the resurrected Christ took place. It's always good to us to see some contemporary examples, but before we do that, let's first re-visit how these 1st Century followers of Christ experienced or depicted their experiences on this.

First of all, let's take a look at St. John. When he and Peter heard report from Mary Magdalene that the tomb-stone had been removed and Jesus' body wasn't there, they went to the tomb. John (the beloved disciple of Jesus) outran Peter and arrived first. But he wasn't sure that he wanted to go in there by himself. Yet when Peter arrived and went into the tomb (which was a cave that got sealed up by the tomb-stone, and now that the tomb-stone had been removed, they could just walk in), so John followed suit. There, we heard his response from our Gospel reading today: 'He went in, saw what's there and believed.'

Faith is sparked from the Easter Good News.

In other words, having seen from outside that 'the linen wrappings (of Jesus' body) lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head also lying there, but not lying with the linen wrapping but rolled up in a place by itself', and when he went in and saw the confirmation that Jesus' body was not there, John encountered the risen Christ through experiencing the empty tomb, and he believed. John added by explaining that 'for as yet they (viz. he and Peter) did not understand the scripture, that (Christ) must rise from the dead'. In other words, John simply exercised faith to believe that Christ had risen from death without first understanding all the prophets' pointing to Christ's resurrection. He simply believed and returned home. That 'faith upon grasping Christ's resurrection' must have given him tons of peace and comfort after the Good Friday agony and Holy Saturday's unsettling grief, fear and disappointment, not to mention the last responsibility Jesus on the cross placed upon him to take care of Mary (Jesus' mother).

How about Mary Magdalene? From her weeping outside the tomb, to finding her spreading the news of Jesus' lost body to Peter and John not being helpful, to failing to heed the two angels' hinting of Jesus' resurrection, and finally to mistaking Jesus as the gardener who might have taken away Jesus' body, what happened when she finally encountered the risen Christ who called her by name, saying: 'Mary'? This is what we learn from the scriptural reading: 'She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Then upon hearing what Jesus told her, Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord" and she told them that he had said these things to her.'

In other words, not only did Mary Magdalene turn her grief and pain into joy and hope upon encountering the risen Christ, she also moved on from there to spread the good news on the resurrected Christ and carried out what Christ told her to say and do.

Hope sprouts from grief and fear upon meeting the resurrected Christ.

How about St. Peter? As we heard earlier on, John got it and believed upon seeing the empty tomb but Peter seemed to be still at a loss, 'for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that Jesus must rise from the dead'. So, all that we heard then was that 'Peter also returned to his home'.

Yet, we shouldn't over-look Peter's words in witness to Jesus' resurrection as proclaimed to the gentiles in Cornelius' house, as we heard from today's First Reading. There, Peter did not only, like John, believe, and like Mary Magdalene, become joy-filled and moved on to carry out Jesus' instructions for her. Peter didn't stop at witnessing to Jesus' resurrection. He proclaimed the good news of Christ's resurrection with his entire heart and intelligence. Let's hear a part of his speech there.

Peter spoke: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. . . . the message of preaching peace by Jesus Christ . . . how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil . . . We are all witnesses . . . They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear . . . to us. . . He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is . . . judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.'

Peter, this former fisherman with little education but had been deeply touched by Christ's forgiveness against his previous denial of his Lord Jesus, spoke eloquently and succinctly about the revelation he received through his first hand experience of what Easter is really about. And so he was telling even Gentiles (i.e. beyond Jews as 'chosen people') the divine mystery of Jesus' identity as well as his accomplishing salvation for all through crucifixion and resurrection. His speech sought to invite the audience to pose faith upon Christ to receive the much-needed forgiveness for all.

The Spirit of Christ empowered Peter to share the Gospel with gentiles.

Now that we have been taking looks at John, Mary Magdalene and Peter, let's turn to Paul to see how he depicted his experience on meeting the resurrected Christ. As we all know, St. Paul was only that highly knowledgeable Pharisee Saul when Jesus underwent crucifixion and resurrection and Saul persecuted the church after the Spirit of Christ empowered Peter and the other apostles to spread the Gospel. It was only during that pivotal event on his way to Damascus that Saul encountered the resurrected Christ and underwent conversion to become the apostle Paul.

So, let's hear how St. Paul proclaimed this good news to the believers of the early church in Corinth. Paul wrote: 'Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you,

which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved . . . that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas (i.e. Peter), then to the twelve . . . Last of all, he also appeared to me . . . I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be . . . an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God . . . (such grace) toward me has not been in vain. Whether it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.'

Encountering the resurrected Christ turned Saul into the apostle Paul.

Well, having seen all these amazing manifestations from encounter with the risen Christ – viz., sparking of faith, sprouting of hope, empowerment by the Spirit to share God's love and turning around of frenzy Saul from being persecutor of Christians to apostle of Christ, it's time to ask: how about us? Yes, we celebrate Easter today and we give thanks for our new life in Christ, especially with baptism this morning. How does the thermometer or barometer of our faith, hope, commitment, and love go?

Exactly one month ago on a Thursday, I found myself somewhat drooping in my office as I worked. My loss of voice had little improvement after a week, I just got the news that my mother-in-law in hospital had to move into Intensive Care Unit to get closer monitoring of her situation, certain ministry matter that I had been following up took unexpected sharp turns that it has to be dealt with in a totally different way etc. All in all, my physical and emotional energy level was low. Then I heard kids from the next-door pre-school playing and shouting happily outside my door. I could imagine their joyous faces under the sun, and I could almost see their running up and down in the playground. I thought to myself: high chance that many of them may not be growing up in Christian family, but I can trust that Christ would be very happy to welcome them and to be with them. With that thought, my thoughts switched quickly to the people whom I was concerned: my mother-in-law, people whom I could and can minister to . . . Then the heaviness on me was lifted - I knew and can trust that as I seek to bear these loved ones gently in heart, Christ is with them, so that life can be celebrated despite it's dreary and gloomy for a while: that's our Easter hope and joy! Amen.