

Homily for Easter Day 2010

At the heart of today's gospel reading lies nothing. First Mary of Magdala, then John and Peter, are surprised, then shocked, then eventually overwhelmed with wonder as they come to the tomb of Jesus and find that it is empty. Can the discovery of an empty space ever, before or since, have been the cause of such emotion? As we celebrate this Easter feast, it might be worth pausing for a while outside the empty tomb and observing what happens when Peter and John arrive there. They have been told by Mary that Jesus is missing, but she has presumed that someone has stolen the body. Peter and John run to see what has happened. When they reach the tomb, however, the two men react in very different ways. John stays outside, but Peter rushes in. In a sense this is just a reflection of their two different characters. John is quiet and reflective, he is the one who was happy to recline next to Jesus at the Last Supper while the more impetuous Peter is signing to him to ask who the betrayer will be (Jn. 13.23-4). But it is also more than this; the reaction of the two men to the empty tomb illustrates two different ways of reacting to Christ and to his Church.

John runs fast, faster than Peter, and he gets to the tomb first. He looks into the tomb, and he sees the cloths that had been wrapped around Jesus lying there but he doesn't go in. Something makes him hold back. Peter, however, who arrives second, doesn't stop to look in first, he plunges straight in, and once Peter has done this, John follows. They both see, and they both believe. This little drama, acted out on the doorstep of the tomb, challenges us today to look at our reaction to the resurrection. Standing outside the tomb, what will we do next?

Some of us, perhaps, approach the empty tomb like Peter. We do not over-intellectualise, we do not stop too long to analyse what is happening, where this might be leading, what the consequences might be. Here is something extraordinary, and we want more. Here is something which we instinctively know is of fundamental importance, and we are in there. Others are more like John. We want to pause for a moment before we do anything too rash, we want to weigh up what it all might mean, we want to be sure we are doing the right thing. That step into the empty tomb is, in fact, a mighty big step. It is going to change everything. John cannot quite bring himself to do it. Then Peter arrives, rushes past him, and is in the middle of the tomb. This is the catalyst John needs, and he follows Peter in. Crossing the door of the tomb is crossing a threshold; it is like crossing from one world into another, like C S Lewis' wardrobe. Peter runs across, and John steps cautiously across, but both of them end up in the same place. They leave behind the world where death rules, and they enter the world where death is conquered and Christ reigns.

Perhaps you know those comedy sketches where unsuspecting people are put in a room that contains nothing but a desk and a huge red button on it that says 'do not press this button'. A secret camera films them and you can almost see the thought processes as they wrestle with the temptation to look at the button, then just to touch the button, then - why not - to have a go and press it. The button invites a response. You can choose to turn your back on it, or you can let it play with you, or you can rush right in and push, but there is no pretending it isn't there. I think that the empty tomb is rather like that button. It invites a response. Today we come to mass, and right in front of us is a great big gaping hole in the hillside. The hole says to us 'are you going to come and look inside?' How will we react? Of course, it is perfectly open to

us to walk on by, to decide that it is asking too much of us right now. Or we might be like John, peering in anxiously, not sure what to do next. Or we might be more like Peter - I'm in there. One way or another, the empty tomb changes us. It challenges us, and forces us into a decision. One of my favourite paintings - I have a copy of it in my study - is a picture of Jesus stepping out of the tomb. He seems to be resting still for a moment, and his face looks squarely out at the viewer. It is as if he is saying to us 'Here I am, this is me, how are you going to react? What will you make of me, what will you do next?'

We are standing together at the doorway of the tomb, and it is time to decide what to do now. Some of us are hesitating like John, and we need some Peters to come along and break the deadlock. Being like John and waiting on the doorstep is fine, but only for so long. As I look at The Church, and all its triumphs and its troubles, I am more and more convinced that the triumphs go to the people who throw themselves in heart and soul, whereas the troubles come to the people who only ever put one foot in the tomb, the ones who want to keep a toe-hold in the world of self, the world of what you see is what you get. Let's cross the threshold together, let's enter the new world of the risen Christ, a world where everything is changed for ever.

I can't quite bring myself to stop there, although I know perhaps I should. In a sense our gospel reading is not complete. We have heard about Peter and John, but what happened to Mary Magdalene, who started the story off? If we read on a little further we would find that she is still outside the tomb. After Peter and John have gone back home Mary is still there, crying. Left alone, she dares to look inside the tomb, and she sees two angels. There is another way into the empty tomb, it seems. Peter came in haste; John came thoughtfully; Mary comes in tears, and somehow the tears act like a filter that allows her to see more clearly, because she sees the angels. Perhaps Mary's way is the best way of all, because she is so very aware of what she needs, of what she is lacking, of what is missing. She sees more than the men, because when she turns around she meets a man she does not at first recognise, not even when he speaks, until he says a single word. He calls her by her name, 'Mary' and with a flood of emotion she understands it all, and she is firmly across the threshold and in that new world, the after-resurrection world, the world which is offered to us today and which, if only we can admit it, is in fact the deepest longing of our hearts.