8.

Who Will Step into the Empty Tomb?

Of all the Easter memories, the story about the women approaching the empty tomb is the one that teases and excites my imagination the most. While the other paschal stories give us warm and colorful scenes about meeting Jesus again, the empty tomb leaves my mind spinning with questions and tense with hope.

Each of the gospels recalls the prominence of women as witnesses to Jesus’ crucifixion. According to Matthew, “Many women were also there, looking on from a distance” (Matt 27:55). According to Mark, “There were also women looking on from a distance” (Mark 15:40). Perhaps sensing an imbalance here, Luke enlarges the group of witnesses: “But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things” (Luke 23:49). John recalls the presence of three Mary’s and a beloved (male) disciple, who were standing near the cross (John 19:25-26).

Yet it was not Jesus’ closest disciples, men or women, who had the privilege of burying him. That honor fell to a certain Joseph of Arimathea, whom John describes as a secret follower and whom Mark characterizes simply as someone waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. Luke says that Joseph was “good and righteous” and Matthew calls him rich; it was into his new tomb that Jesus was placed. But as the curtain descends in the burial scene the spotlight returns to the women: “Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb” (Matt 27:61). How long their vigil lasted, we are not told.
In the reverent haste to bury Jesus before the onset of the Sabbath rest, there had been no time for the women to give his body the final, customary anointing. And so Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome set out at the break of dawn on that first day of the week, expecting to find the body of their beloved teacher where it had been laid. Each of the gospels takes note of the stone that had been rolled against the entrance, a fact which the women could have scarcely forgotten. There is then something curious, even unreal about their plan to anoint Jesus, because they could never have rolled away the stone unaided. The male disciples had pretty much disappeared after Jesus’ arrest, and the women certainly would not have been counting on assistance from the Roman soldiers or the high priest’s police! Do the evangelists want us to assume therefore that the women were trusting that God would somehow provide? At the grave, a heavenly messenger meets them:

“Do not be amazed! You seek Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Behold, the place where they laid him” (Mark 16:6).

But why shouldn’t they be amazed? Who of us would not be astonished coming upon that menacing, puzzling scene? Not finding the body of Jesus where they had supposed it to be, and unable to comprehend the full import of the messenger’s words, the women flee from the tomb, trembling, bewildered and fearful. So, I imagine, would we, and for much the same reasons. The evangelist does not tell us that the women had been in a state of fear when they set out for the tomb. The disciples would have had good reason to be apprehensive, but these women appear to be remarkably unafraid as the scene opens.
I think the idea of “stepping into the tomb” and discovering it empty is rich with symbolic possibility, especially for anyone interested in the meaning of religious life, or even Christian life in general, on the eve of a new millennium. The women had gone in search of Jesus. They were seeking the Jesus of their memories, the one betrayed and crucified; the Jesus whom they had known as a friend, whose physical features and mannerisms, whose voice and turns of phrase, whose passion and humor had become so familiar to them. Looking for that Jesus, they were “utterly amazed” when they found his grave empty. “They said nothing to anyone,” Mark tells us, “for they were afraid.”

Were the women afraid of being misunderstood, doubted, or even accused of fabrication? Was their fear so strong that they were literally unable to speak? Or were they fearful because they suspected that the enemies of Jesus might have removed the body, and would have killed anyone unfortunate enough to stumble upon the facts? Of course, their reaction might well have been just the final instance in the gospel of disciples responding with fear in the face of what they do not understand. The amazement here is really not all that different from the reaction of the disciples when Jesus calmed the winds and the sea. Both scenes are beset with mystery; one hears in them resonances of divine power at work in the human world.

Perhaps the women reported nothing, at least initially, because there was as yet nothing to say. What exactly had happened? What did the discovery of an empty tomb mean? What was the God of Israel doing and declaring in raising Jesus from the dead, why this person and not someone else? Their fear and amazement must have stemmed, at least in part, from not knowing how to make sense of their experience. They stood
in the messenger’s presence stunned, speechless, without words that might have brought to the moment a sense of fulfillment. The women had taken a fateful step into the wide-open darkness of God, into what Pierre Teilhard de Chardin once called “the mystery hidden here on earth in the womb of death.” The world as they had known it was turned upside down; everyday life would never look or feel the same way again.

No wonder, then, that the women took to their heels! Given the extraordinary reversal into which they had just stepped, fear and confusion would have been natural human responses. Creation had been turned inside out and made to reveal its inner surface. The terrifying darkness of death had just been torn in two, from top to bottom, like the curtain in the temple. But the women would never have been able to grasp the far-reaching significance of all that in a single morning! They had expected to find in the tomb the body of the crucified One. Instead they received the startling announcement that the crucified One was, from that morning and ever after, to be encountered among the living.

In subsequent encounters the disciples would sometimes stand before the risen Jesus uncomprehending, doubtful, saddened, skeptical and confused. At other times they would experience profound peace, joy, forgiveness, love, freedom, and a sense of being called and sent. Yet it is the empty tomb that strikingly captures the mystery and complexity of the Easter experience. In order to anoint the body of Jesus, the women had no choice but to step into the place where he had been buried. While I would be obviously stretching things to suggest that they had come upon the tomb at the moment when Jesus was descending into hell to rescue the spirits of the dead (1 Peter 3:19), the fact is that they had stumbled upon the divine
unknown, into a certain mystical darkness. God had rolled back the great stone that would have refused them entrance, the stone that in some way was protecting them against the abyss and darkness that surrounds human beings on every side.

And in that moment of seeing but not finding, of knowing but not speaking, what was the revelation that they were being given? It was that Jesus’ disciples should be looking for him here, in this world. Finding and following Jesus would demand a completely new way of perceiving, hearing, thinking and praying. Instead of withdrawing from the world, Jesus risen had joined himself to it in lasting solidarity. The Word had already become flesh; now it was also becoming history.

Religious life: resource for the Church

Many religious have long sensed that entering religious life was a way of inserting oneself more deeply into the human community, not of withdrawing from it emotionally and even physically in order to find God. They know very well that finding God is the paramount business of everyone’s life, and that others in the Church should be able to approach religious for assistance, confidently, as they seek to deepen their interior lives.

Yet it has also been our experience that religious life is no refuge against personal struggle, self-centeredness, dealing with the human condition and with other people, and against the daily misfortune endured by so many men and women who live (for want of a better expression) in the world. On the contrary, sometimes religious life seems to concentrate and intensify ordinary human struggle to the breaking point.

Whatever insights into the interior life religious men and women achieve are gifts of the Spirit and these gifts are not
intended primarily for the benefit of individual religious and their communities. The reason is simple. An individual’s or a community’s interior life is incomplete unless it is rooted in the life of the people of God. Gifts of the Spirit, after all, are not bestowed for the private delight and enrichment of individuals, as Paul reminded us in his correspondence with the Christians at Corinth:

There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. . . . [S]ince you are eager for spiritual gifts, strive to excel in them for building up the church. (1 Cor 12:4-6; 14:12)

The Spirit bestows its gifts for the building up of the one body, which is Christ. For Paul, purely private gifts of the Spirit would be a contradiction, since each of us has been given to drink of the one Spirit (1 Cor 12:13). Those men and women drawn by the Spirit to embrace religious life are actually being drawn to share more deeply in the life of the people of God. Apart from the Church, religious life has no persuasive reason for existence. The Easter appearances, to cite an important example, were hardly private consolations for divinely selected individuals. Each of them figures in some way into the forming and strengthening of the Church. In other words, the full meaning of the Easter stories is ecclesiological; they shed light on the ongoing and deepening relation between the risen Jesus and his disciples.

If the spirituality underlying a religious community were to become so specialized that it applied to vowed religious alone, bearing little or no relevance to the wider Christian body, then that spirituality would soon lead the members of that community into an idiosyncratic, maybe even an alienating
enactment of Christian existence. Even if they repeated the same creed, we would not recognize them as belonging to us in spirit and in practice. The creation of a spirituality which was a world apart from the interiority of ordinary men and women would further reinforce the mistaken idea that Christianity is two-tiered, comprised of a church of the zealous religious professionals and a church of the less than fully committed.

To avoid this mistake we religious have to keep reminding ourselves that the basic form of our life is a gift of the Spirit and the living of it presumes a charism. Of course baptismal existence itself, because it is life according to the Spirit of Jesus, is thoroughly charismatic, provided it has been fully embraced. Yet the particular charism of religious life is to serve the people of God and contribute to the upbuilding of the Church. Through their teaching, their example, their prophetic witness, and often through their writing and spiritual direction, religious men and women assist the rest of the Christian community in finding God in their own lives and within their particular circumstances.

Religious life is not an exception to ordinary Christian existence but an intensification of it. Naturally, its witness to the gospel has to be unambiguous; mixed signals are worthless. Indeed, when religious life is unsure of itself it undermines the credibility of the gospel; the emptiness of charism is concealed by the outward success of institutions. People are not looking for reeds shaken by the wind or for someone dressed in soft robes, but for prophets (Luke 7:24-26). The majority of Christians might not be able to accompany the women into the empty tomb, but some Christians must do so in order to bring what they discover there back to their sisters and brothers. Perhaps, like Jesus, they will proclaim God’s victory to spirits still languishing in their prisons.
The vast majority of those writing on the interior life have been religious, as we would probably expect, and they write best when their experience and instruction enable others in the Church to walk the way of faith more securely and confidently. The whole Church has been helped in its ascent to holiness because those men and women, within the challenges and limitations of their time and place in history, embarked upon journeys of the human spirit. Their pilgrimages have illumined the often obscure, sometimes treacherous paths upon which the rest of us have sometimes found ourselves.

They have stepped into the tomb of the heart’s poverty and sinfulness, and they have identified the long thread tying our petty, everyday sins with the violence, greed, hatred and pride that can destroy nations and entire civilizations. They have walked into the riddles of the heart’s deceits, the tomb of its not-knowing, and there discovered the purifying darkness of God’s own truth. They have penetrated the womb of death and discovered there the paradox of risen life.

They have entered the emptiness of egoism and self-love, and there discovered the road to a truly redeemed, liberated love—a road which has to be taken by all of us, religious or not. Religious men and women enter the tomb of human fear, the repository of all that terrifies us in the face of incomprehensible mystery, and there discover the great freedom that sets hearts on fire with a message of hope and of life. Religious are men and women who have entered the tomb and faced its mysterious, life-giving emptiness.

**Religious as pioneers in the ways of the Spirit**

Religious are pioneers in matters that touch the human spirit. The ways or dynamics of the interior life that they uncover and map out for us are not something esoteric, reserved
only for a select few. Rather, to the degree that their own interior growth takes place through and in the Spirit of Jesus, their spirituality can guide the rest of God’s people into the fullness of truth and life.

The Spirit calls upon only a fraction of Christians to embrace religious life. They are not singled out in order to attain more remarkable holiness or perfection than everybody else, but to chart the way of the Spirit. They have been called to teach and to accompany their brothers and sisters in living the gospel fully and without compromise.

Just as the women were instructed to bring their news to the disciples, so too religious are sent to tell the rest of God’s people about where Jesus is to be found:

“But go and tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you’.”
(Mark 16:7)

Properly Christian holiness (for I believe that there are other forms) is not a personal attribute, a quality or accomplishment that a person attains as a result of his or her private effort, no matter how strenuous or even noble that effort may be. The point represents both sound theology and the wisdom of experience. The Christian does not pursue holiness for its own sake. We do not even want to be holy in order to be more pleasing in God’s sight, and certainly not to be more attractive and virtuous in the eyes of our neighbor. We are just as surely not seeking holiness for our own pleasure, as if to satisfy some primeval craving to be like God. Holiness is a mark of the Church, a Christ-pointer; it is the consequence of loving God with an undivided heart and it is rendered “visible” in terms of solidarity with communities of suffering.
The Christian becomes holy by loving God above all things, a love that unfolds and matures in the concrete decisions and choices of everyday life; and by loving and serving the neighbor. Holiness is a matter of growing outward and upward, and while it frequently entails strenuous effort, growth in the Spirit only happens as we respond to God’s overtures toward us in the hundreds and thousands of details, encounters, moments, memories, conversations, meals, relationships, joys and sufferings of everyday life.

Like other Christians, men and women in religious life wrestle with belief and despondency, frailty and temptation. They have to learn, sometimes painfully, the way of discernment. They know what it is like to resist God, to lose their taste and their appetite for spiritual things, and finally to be lifted into intimacy with God. If the Spirit of God leads them to a deeper, richer prayer life as a result of the storms that not infrequently pass through their souls, and even into mysticism, then this too is always for the sake of others. For the whole people of God is invited to be mystics, and that this invitation might be realized the Church will always turn to its religious for guidance and encouragement.

The point here is that Christian holiness should never be thought of along the lines of individual achievement, the way we think about the accomplishments of athletes, inventors or recipients of Nobel prizes. No one becomes holy unaided and holiness without solidarity would be empty and meaningless. The Holy Spirit itself raises up men and women who will become familiar with the ways of the Spirit by traveling those paths to God which unfold inside the human heart. The failure to appreciate how holiness is actually given to the Church would seriously jeopardize the integrity of Christian spirituality.
Religious may be pioneers in the ways of the Spirit for the men and women of their time, but as people learning about God they are never lone rangers. God has clearly not called most Christians to be religious consecrated by vows, yet through baptism God has called each and every one of us to holiness and perfection.

Religious play a vital role in bringing the rest of the Church to understand what living out our common baptism is all about. Once again, they enter the tomb for us. These men and women are not necessarily holier than other Christians, but they ought certainly to be more knowledgeable in the ways of the Spirit. The Easter women did not actually observe the risen Jesus inside the tomb. They, together with the other disciples, would have to locate him “in Galilee,” where the risen Jesus once more would be walking ahead of them. The risen Jesus, the disciples learn, is recognized through the indelible marks of crucifixion; he will always remain the crucified One. And this implies that if the disciples want to find Jesus risen, they must seek him not only among the living, but especially among those men and women in our world who, like Jesus, carry the marks of crucifixion.

**Joy and freedom**

Finding and recognizing the risen Jesus becomes the ultimate explanation for Christian joy. John tells us:

> When [Jesus] had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples *rejoiced* when they saw the Lord.  
*(John 20:20)*

Being with the risen Jesus with a happiness and hopefulness that disarm every fear is what creates Christian freedom and makes it bold. It is not just the truth that sets us free; it is also deep, abiding joy. Joy and freedom might well be the principal
evidence that our lives are rooted in the Easter story. For from joy springs hope and confidence that the ultimate victory over the forces of death and sin belongs to God. And from freedom there springs the bold speech and daring actions of prophets, or the freedom of those who are willing to let go of whatever is necessary in order to stand with the crucified ones of history.

Men and women in religious life are expected to enter the tomb, to learn in all humility and modesty the way of the Spirit, to traverse the inner reaches of the human mind and heart, and to master the difference between the way of life and the way of death.

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