

Easter Sunday of the Lord's Resurrection – April 1, 2018 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – 8:30am and 11:00am Masses – 1,175 words



The painting referred to below by Eugène Burnand (1898). Displayed at the Musee d'Orsay, Paris.

God created Adam and Eve in a state of holiness, justice, and grace; but they lost those gifts through the Original Sin. Ever since that time, early in the history of Creation, the human race awaited its redeemer. And God did not hesitate in promising a future savior. But he also did not say how long it would be until he came. Nor, on the whole, could we say that he ever in a single prophecy gave a very clear picture of exactly who the redeemer would be, when he would come, and how he would accomplish our salvation. All of the Old Testament prophets had foretold the Christ, but in the end, people disagreed on most of the details. And there was no strict necessity that God should become man, that he should suffer at the hands of men, or that he should die on a cross – much less rise on the third day. Looking back now, we can put all the pieces together and see that God's plan was perfectly fulfilled in Christ, and that he did what was most fitting to save us. But back in Old Testament times – looking ahead – things were not so clear.

Imagine, then, what it was like for Peter and John, when Mary Magdalene came to them breathless, announcing that the tomb was empty. Christ had told them that he was the one. He told them exactly what would happen. They witnessed miracles that unmistakably revealed his divinity. After all, they had been on the Mount of Transfiguration! Yet they still doubted. They did not really understand what “resurrection” meant; his death, precipitated by injustice and brutality, seemed like such a defeat. Moreover, he had been in the tomb for three days. Surely they had misunderstood him. Surely it was all too good to be true! But now the Magdalene comes with shocking news. And they start to run.

There is a wonderful painting in a museum in Paris that depicts this very moment. It is by a Swiss artist and has a rather pedestrian name – “The Disciples Peter and John Running to the Sepulchre on the Morning of the Resurrection” – but its quality and beauty is anything but

ordinary. The background is a lovely shade of yellow that perfectly captures the early light. John is slightly ahead of Peter and also looks younger, as the gospel relates. John, who had not denied Jesus, and had remained at the foot of his cross; John, who had a purer faith, has a look of astonished hope on his face. It's as if he is thinking: "It is true; I knew it! Oh please, let it be true!" Peter is older; he looks bewildered; he still deeply regrets the fact that he had denied the Lord Jesus three times; perhaps he thinks also about how this might be his chance to be forgiven. And as you widen your focus from their faces to the entire scene, it is very clear: they are running. There is a wonderful sense of movement, a sense of urgency.

So imagine what it was like for them in that moment. So many generations – centuries and centuries – had passed since our first parents committed the first sin, what the Easter Vigil liturgy calls the "happy fault" that won for us such and so great a redeemer. So many people had waited and did not live to see the Christ, much less live to witness his passion, death, and resurrection. But John and Peter did. Mary Magdalene did. All the other disciples did. And they are now all in disbelief. What seemed too good to be true, or what had seemed just so unlikely, truly was happening – and it was happening to them. In the midst of the panic, the haste, the fear, the amazement, and all of the other emotions of that first Easter Sunday, their eyes really began to be opened to the full truth of our Lord Jesus Christ. I hope that we all can experience some of their wonder also, meditating now on this incredible scene.

Well, what are the parallels between this scene and our own lives? How has God surprised us in the most unlikely or seemingly impossible of ways? Or how many times have we thrown in the towel or given up hope, only to be shown up by the Lord later, perhaps when we least expected it? And what about our faith? Have we had doubts, like John seemingly did? Have our own sins clouded our vision and dulled our hope, like appears to have happened with Peter? And what about Mary Magdalene, who was basically in a panic: have God's surprises even shaken us at times? The Lord fulfills every one of his promises, and he does so in a wonderful way. But he rarely does so according to our schedule or our imaginings. Our field of vision is just too limited; our comprehension is so imperfect; our faith is often too weak.

Today we heard from the gospel of John; the same scene, as recounted by Mark, concludes by saying that Christ was going before the disciples to Galilee: he would meet them there. Indeed, Christ always goes ahead of us and he will always be there when we finally figure things out – when we finally put the pieces together and our eyes are fully opened. Like Mary Magdalene, Peter, and John, we are only capable of showing up late; it is Christ, rather, who goes ahead of us and ultimately comes to look for us. It is he who shines his light into our lives, making clear what was formerly shrouded in mystery and revealing to us how he never, in fact, really left us – how his work was being accomplished all along. We may be able to look back now, see the whole story of Christ's life, and grasp it intellectually; but let us not miss the fact that we must also live it out, in all the ways that it parallels our particular lives here and now. For through baptism we have been made partakers in his life, death, and resurrection – and he bids us follow him.

As we renew our baptismal vows this Easter, let us ask the Lord to shed a brighter ray of light into our hearts and minds so that we may more fully grasp that the Christian mystery is not one that we observe from afar, but one that we intimately live out. The life of Christ is replicated in a unique way in each of our lives, and that mystery is for us to discover and treasure. Jesus Christ is truly risen and has gone before us! If we persist in looking for him, we will find him; he, indeed, will find us, and he will open our eyes to a plan that is far more wondrous than we could have ever imagined!

Together with Bishop Baker and all of our priests and deacons, I wish to you and your families a very blessed and holy Easter!