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Like Alabaster Jars of Nard

Biblical Reflection for Easter Vigil C

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, MARCH 30, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://zenit.org)).- I consider the Resurrection chapter (24) of Luke's Gospel to be a beautiful symphony in three major movements. In the first movement of the empty tomb narrative (vv.1-12), God alone breaks open a helpless and hopeless situation. In the second movement of the Emmaus story (vv.13-35), God, in the person of Jesus, accompanies people on their journeys through the ruins of despair and death. The stories of the third movement present Jesus among his disciples (vv.36-53) and lead people into an experience of community.

The Gospel for the Easter Vigil this year (24:1-12) is the first movement of the Resurrection Symphony. It is the women who first discover the empty tomb and receive the message of the angels that Jesus has been raised. While the women are not named in Chapter 23, in 24:10 we learn that it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, the mother of James, and some others. Even though the apostles were to be witnesses to the resurrection (Acts 1:22), they seem to be in disarray while the women disciples are on hand to receive the joyful news.

The story of the empty tomb begins with a reference to the spices that the women had prepared. The previous passage recounting the burial of Jesus (23:50-56), ends with the note that the women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph of Arimathea and saw the tomb and how the body of Jesus was laid. The women knew the exact tomb where Jesus was placed. There was no possibility of mistaking the tomb. Having prepared spices and ointments, they rested on the Sabbath according to the Jewish law. As soon as the Sabbath was over they came to embalm the body of Jesus for proper burial.

In their great perplexity before the empty tomb, the women are questioned why they seek the living one among the dead. They are challenged by the two men in dazzling clothes to remember what Jesus had told them while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man had to suffer, be crucified and on the third day rise again. In one brief moment, everything changes! Jesus "is not here, but has risen."

The tragic story of Good Friday does not end with the death of Jesus. There is a sequel. God raises Jesus from the dead and thereby writes another chapter in the history of salvation. There will be a tomorrow because the grave is not the end. The announcement, which changed the sadness of these pious women into joy, re-echoes with unchanging eloquence throughout the Church in the celebration of this Easter Vigil.

Words and events

The four Gospels were written from the perspective of the faith of the disciples after they experienced the actual events of Jesus' death and resurrection. That same Easter faith informed and shaped the Gospel story as we have it. Throughout these stories, there is a dynamic interplay between event, faith, and the final shape of the biblical text. There is repeated admonition to remember words and events from the past. In fact, one of the human pitfalls or flaws is that too quickly we forget what God had said or done. God on the other hand

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does not forget. God remembers and is faithful to His covenant.

In verse 8 of today's Gospel we read: "Then they remembered his words." The women respond in faith by remembering the words of Jesus. They believe the message of the angels by remembering what Jesus said and they go to tell the eleven and the others the good news. But their words "seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them" (v. 11). The women believe, but the eleven apostles do not!

While Luke gives so much prominence to the apostles in the Gospel and in Acts, he is also candid enough to point out the failure of human leaders in the story. In many commentaries on this particular passage, the dominant thought is that the apostles did not believe the women precisely because they were women, as if the result would have been much different had the report of the resurrection been brought by men! I do not think that the problem was due to the fact that women were involved. The problem is that the male apostles simply did not remember what Jesus had said.

Despite their disbelief, Peter apparently believes the women enough that he runs to the tomb and sees the linen cloths and goes home amazed at what had happened. His response is hardly genuine faith. Let us never forget that amazement falls short of authentic faith. The crowds who saw the miracles of Jesus could be amazed but still not become disciples. Discipleship requires commitment, trust, and obedience; amazement does not.

Symphonies of our own

The movements of Luke's Resurrection Symphony are stages in our individual and communal lives of faith. How often have we found ourselves before stonewalls, tombs, when nothing or no one could revive our hopes or alleviate our despair? Easter is the promise that death will visit each of us. But more important, it is the assurance that death does not complete life, but only changes it. The Easter mysteries give us a new identity and a new name: We are saved, redeemed, renewed; we are Christian, and we have no more need for fear or despair. The tomb could not hold the Lord of Life.

Tomb in Jerusalem

In the midst of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem is the tomb of Jesus, a shrine to the risen Christ. He is not there. He is among us.

Having lived in Jerusalem for nearly four years, I can assure you that all around that tomb are the remnants of over 2,000 years of dreadfully human discord, chaos and corruption that continues to this very day. Nevertheless, it is the most important shrine and holy place for Christians.

The resurrection of Jesus is the sign that God is ultimately going to win. At Calvary, and elsewhere throughout the Church, corruption seems so rampant. On this night when the Lord broke the bonds of death, we know deep within that God is ultimately victorious. I know this within my flesh and bones, in my heart of hearts, because 70 feet away from Calvary there is a tomb, which is now empty.

God shall win, and conquer sin and death. God shall build a just society. As Christians, we have an even deeper message -- not that God is going to win, but that we in Christ are going to win.

Women and Easter

We still have profound lessons to learn from the women who ran to the tomb that first Easter morning. They represented countless, nameless, yet devoted women who were part of the crowds that Jesus addressed and in the homes he frequented.

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They were the courageous ones who reached out fearlessly to touch the fringe of his cloak. They shouted after him; they entered his hosts' houses uninvited, they poured most expensive, perfumed nard over his feet to the consternation of the critics. Some met him at wells at high noon. They waited on him and waited for him, and they accompanied him from Galilee to Samaria to Jerusalem. They knew the promise made to them, they welcomed him, they knew from Jesus' own treatment of them the strength of their own testimony to him, and they were unafraid to show him great love.

In the end, they stood beneath his dying body, while the men were hiding for fear of the authorities. It was the women who ground spices for his burial and they calculated how to roll back the stone from his tomb. They attended firmly to the business of his living and dying. They were rewarded for their fidelity by being the first recipients of the Good News of the Resurrection.

Women of the Church

Whenever I read this Easter Gospel, I cannot help but think of the lives of countless women religious who greatly influenced my life from my childhood, and encouraged me to be a Christian and a priest. I remember with gratitude the Religious of the Sacred Heart and the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester, my first teachers.

I recall with deep emotion the Sisters of the Holy Family of Spoleto and the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary with whom I had the privilege of working in my first years of pastoral ministry in Canada. The Sisters of Sion, the Salvatorian Sisters of Emmaus el-Quebeibeh and Nazareth and the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition showed me how to love and imitate the Lord in his own homeland during my graduate studies.

Later on the Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto and Hamilton and the Sisters of Mercy of Ireland shared with me very fruitful years of ministry at the Newman Center of Toronto and most especially during World Youth Day 2002. The diminishment of many of these religious congregations in the Church is cause for sadness, yet also of profound gratitude. I regret that several generations of young people will never have the grace of getting to know women religious as I knew them: as teachers, pastoral workers, colleagues and friends.

Though their "charisms" will live on through lay-led institutions in many instances, nothing can ever replace their presence in the life of the Church and in our own personal stories. Their lives were alabaster jars of nard poured out in active service, in decisive, courageous, prophetic works, and in watchful presence at the end. Their action on Jesus' behalf was hopeful, positive, courageous, and unambiguous. Their active faith in him and their decisive following of him are, finally, the unchanging beauty and eloquence of the Church's vocation. When I think of that first Easter, in an eerie, garden-like setting outside the walls of Jerusalem, I cannot help but remember the faithful women in my life who have carried the message of the Resurrection to the ends of the earth.

"This is the day that the Lord has made: let us rejoice in it and be glad. Alleluia!"

[The readings for the Easter Vigil are Genesis 1:1-2:2 or 1:1, 26-31a; Genesis 22:1-18 or 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18; Exodus 14:15-15:1; Isaiah 54:5-14; Isaiah 55:1-11; Baruch 3:9-15, 32-4:4; Ezekiel 36:16-17a, 18-28; Romans 6:3-11 and Luke 24:1-12]

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On the Net:

Salt and Light: www.saltandlighttv.org

The Beauty of the Resurrection: www.saltandlighttv.org/prog_slprog_snl_presents_easter_video0.html

Easter Reflection "How shall we find words for the Resurrection?":
www.youtube.com/watch?v=byx_YBLck0k&feature=related

Easter reflection on Salt and Light: www.saltandlighttv.org/prog_slprog_snl_presents_easter_video1.html

Thank You JPII: www.youtube.com/watch?v=tN8SfIZ0uR4&feature=channel

or

Thank You JPII (longer version): www.saltandlighttv.org/prog_slprog_thanku_jp2.html

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