

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Easter for us is a time of great joy. We celebrate with bright flowers, sweet candies, baked hams, and, on Easter, even Catholics shout ALLEUIA. That first Easter, however, was anything but joyful. It started in the dark of night. Two heart-broken women clinging to each other in sorrow and fear make their way to a cemetery. They carry spices and oils with which to anoint the dead body of one whom they loved. They don't know what they'll find there. They know there's a huge stone closing up the tomb which is little more than a hole carved in a rock. They have no idea if they'll even be able to open the grave. They know soldiers have been posted at the cemetery to make sure no one disturbed this particular grave. Maybe the soldiers will help them roll back the stone?

On arriving, they're alarmed to see that the stone has been rolled back. Here the accounts of the Gospels differ. Matthew tells us, "there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, approached, rolled back the stone, and sat upon it...the guards were shaken with fear of him and became like dead men. The angel speaks to the women: "Do not be afraid! I know that you are seeking Jesus...he is not here, for he has been raised just as he said. Go quickly and tell his disciples." The women run off and Jesus meets them; they approach, embrace his feet, and did him homage. Jesus says to them, "Do not be afraid. Go tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me."

John, who was more of an eyewitness, tells it this way. He says that Mary of Magdala came to the tomb when it was still dark and saw the stone removed from the tomb. So she runs to Simon Peter and "to the other disciple whom Jesus loved (which, of course, was John himself) and tells them, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him." Peter and John run to the cemetery. John even boasts a little bit, telling that he had outrun Peter. John waits and lets Peter enter the tomb first. They see the empty tomb with the burial cloths, but there is no body. John tells us he saw and believed. But what did he believe because in the next verse he says, "For they did not yet understand the scripture that he had to rise from the dead."

He says that he and Peter returned home, but Mary stayed, weeping at the tomb. It was then that Jesus appeared to her. She didn't recognize him at first. She thought he was the gardener. It was only when he spoke her name, "Mary", that she knew it was the Lord. She tried to reach out to him, but he said, "Stop holding on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father." He then tells her, "Go to my brothers and tell them, I am going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." She goes and tells the disciples what she had seen and heard, but, of course, no one believed her—after all, in their eyes, she was just a hysterical woman.

There are elements of both Matthew's and John's accounts in those of Mark and Luke. Mark is the one who tells us that the disciples did not believe what the women told them.

Why, you may ask, are there all these different versions of the Resurrection? Primarily because the accounts were written many years after the event and memories get jumbled over time, and, secondly, because all those recounting what they had witnessed were frightened and bewildered at the time. But all accounts are consistent in testifying to the reality that He had risen from the dead.

By the time Peter gives his testimony that we read in the Acts of the Apostles, he is much more definite: "We are witnesses...They put him to death hanging him on a tree. This man God raised on the third day and granted that he be visible, not to all the people, but to us, the witnesses chosen by God in advance, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead."

Please consider with me for a moment what those disciples were experiencing on that first Easter. A sense of hopelessness had enshrouded them after his crucifixion. They had thought he was the Messiah, but had seen or heard how he died, naked and disgraced on a Cross, while being mocked and spat upon. Where were the 10,000 angels who could come at his beck and call? So they cowered behind locked doors, their emotions a mixture of cynicism, despair, even depression, overwhelming them.

Many of us have had such moments, when we thought all was lost and were without hope. One such man, a young lawyer, descended into a valley of such despondency. Things were going so poorly for him that his friends thought it best to keep all knives and razors away from him for fear he would attempt suicide. At that time he wrote in his diary, "I am now the most miserable man living. Whether I shall ever be better, I cannot tell. I fear I shall not." The young lawyer's name was Abraham Lincoln.

Many of you have gone through such pain. The words of doctor, "I'm sorry. It is malignant. There is nothing we can do." A call in the night, "There's been an accident. Please come to the hospital right away." The proverbial pink slip, "Your job has been eliminated. Please do not return on Monday. HR will be in touch." As a child, trying to comprehend what she is hearing, "Mommy and Daddy haven't been getting along too well lately. We've decided to try living apart for a while." Many of us have had our own dark nights. Easter was not born in the brightness of the day. The women came to the tomb when it was still dark.

The darkness of a moment and our tear-swollen eyes may blind us to the reality that, as with Mary Magdala, he is standing right beside us. As she heard him speak her name, "Mary", we need in that moment of darkness to listen for his voice.

Christ is not dead! He is alive! And because He lives, I can face tomorrow! Because he lives all fear is gone! Because I know He holds the future. And life is worth the living just because He lives!

And that's why, on this Easter, unlike that first Easter, we need to shout! We have to shout! ALLELUIA! ALLELUIA! ALLELUIA!