

Rejoice and Be Glad

Daily Reflections for Easter to Pentecost 2021

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Introduction

Nearly all Christians are familiar with the forty-day penitential season of Lent that leads to Easter. It is a time for prayer, repentance, and almsgiving. In recent times, many have also added the practice of prayerful reading of Scripture (*lectio divina*) as a way to deepen their appreciation of God's Word during this holy season. All of these are good spiritual practices to put our "spiritual house" in order and prepare for the great celebration of the resurrection.

Much less familiar is the fifty-day Easter season that begins on Easter Sunday and leads to the great feast of Pentecost! (The word Pentecost means "fiftieth"; the Christian celebration is rooted in the Jewish harvest festival of the same name, which occurred fifty days after the first sabbath of the feast of Unleavened Bread.) Once Lent is over, many faithful just return to the normal rhythm of life and make no special effort to appreciate what a gift the Easter season is to the church. This is unfortunate because it is the only time in the liturgical year when we hear sequential readings from the Acts of the Apostles—the second volume of Luke's gospel—telling the fascinating story of the birth of the church. It is also a time to recount the multiple stories of the appearances of the risen Lord Jesus, the many encounters with him that emboldened the apostles to preach the gospel message. During this season all the readings, which include excerpts from many of Jesus' discourses in John's gospel describing essential aspects of

the Christian faith, lead up to Pentecost, which officially inaugurates the mission of the church to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

This little book is intended to compensate for this lack of attention to a vital liturgical season. Not only will it expose readers to Acts, the New Testament appearance stories, and many parts of the Gospel of John, but also it will address many themes tied to other readings throughout the fifty days that help to give the church its forward-looking, evangelizing thrust. While this book cannot do full justice to the breadth and depth of the Scriptures in this season, it can provide brief, reflective moments each day to deepen your appreciation of God's Word acting in the world and in the life the church *today*.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is truly risen! That is the essential message of Easter. Let us celebrate it with joy throughout this holy season.

Reflections

Seeing and Believing

Readings: Acts 10:34a, 37-43; Col 3:1-4 or 1 Cor 5:6b-8; John 20:1-9

Scripture:

Then the other disciple also went in, the one who had arrived at the tomb first, and he saw and believed. (John 20:8)

Reflection: Peter's speech in Acts 10 is a little summary of the essential gospel message: God raised Jesus from the dead and made his disciples witnesses of this truth to proclaim to the ends of the earth. But how difficult it is to believe this message, even though it is at the core of Christian faith!

There is a man, personally unknown to me, who periodically emails me with different versions of the same question: Does the New Testament teach the doctrine of *bodily* resurrection? He is troubled by the concept. (He is not the only one.) It makes no rational sense. After death, we return to dust. How can we resurrect physically? Isn't it more a spiritual resurrection? Or perhaps simply that the spirit of the deceased remains in the memory of loved ones who cherished him or her? Or maybe it only concerns the individual's ideals that remain?

The story of the race to the empty tomb between Peter and the Beloved Disciple on Easter morning illustrates this dilemma. Only the latter immediately perceived the truth;

initially only *he* “saw and believed.” Today is not the day to get mired in the details of how Jesus’ resurrection took place, or what it means for the resurrection of the dead that he promised his followers. Hundreds of books have tried to explain this mystery, to no full avail. What is clear, though—and the appearance stories we hear throughout the Easter season show this—is that it was the same Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified and was raised from the dead! Transformed, yes, but more than just a memory, more than just a sum of his teachings. For us, as for the first disciples, it comes back to faith—seeing *and* believing.

Meditation: The word that most characterizes the Easter season is *alleluia*. A Hebrew poetic word that means “Yahweh (God) be praised!” it rolls off the tongue almost as a song. Make it a personal mantra throughout the day, quietly reflecting on how God has blessed us through the message of the resurrection.

Prayer: Lord of creation, on this “day of the sun,” the first day of the week, I praise and give you thanks for the hope you have sent into the world by vindicating your Son, raising him to new life, and thereby defeating death. Alleluia!

Be Not Afraid

Readings: Acts 2:14, 22-33; Matt 28:8-15

Scripture:

“Do not be afraid. Go tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.” (Matt 28:10)

Reflection: Like ripples in a pond into which a stone has been tossed that spread out inevitably to the surrounding shores, so the message of Easter Sunday echoes unceasingly in the first eight days (octave) of the Easter season. Each day is a solemn feast day, filled with sung alleluias, glorias, and joyous songs of the resurrection. “Alleluia, Christ is risen from the dead” resounds over and over and over again. It is easy to forget, however, that there are distinct elements in each of the resurrection appearance stories that we hear.

Today’s encounter in Matthew 28 involves the risen Jesus meeting two women from his circle of followers, Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary” (not his mother). His first words to them are, “Do not be afraid.” We can assume that the reason for this admonition was the fear and astonishment on their faces. They had witnessed his death on a cross and saw him buried (Matt 27:56, 61). But suddenly there he was in front of them, instructing them to bear the message to Jesus’ disciples (“brothers”). Why do we so easily forget that the very first witnesses of the resurrection were *women*? Not

the apostles Jesus had chosen! Indeed, ancient tradition calls Mary Magdalene “the apostle to the apostles” because of her unique role as the first to encounter the risen Lord, believe in his resurrection, and announce it to the disciples who carried it forth. Thank God for these faithful women who did not succumb to their fear. Thank God for their witness. In the New Testament, they are shown as the only faithful contingent from the beginning to the end of Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection.

Meditation: Who are the women who have most impacted your own life? Have you done justice to the contributions they made to your well-being, perhaps to your status? Have you ever stereotyped women or denigrated them because of their gender? Pray for women today—and include the fearless Mary Magdalene.

Prayer: Lord, I thank you for my mother who bore me into the world and set me on the right path. Let me never forget her gift to me and the many blessings I have received through the quiet, unassuming role of women who have touched my life. Alleluia!