

EASTER 2020

The Empty Tomb

'The Light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it'

(John 1:5)

John 20: 1-9

In his book **'The God of Surprises,'** (1) the late Gerard Hughes SJ makes the point that we cannot control God. Yet, at times, it is true that all of us fall into the trap of expecting God to behave in the way we think he should behave and therefore do what we want him to do. Sadly what this results in is our failure to let God be God and this is exactly the point that Gerard Hughes is making. The prophet Isaiah puts it like this, **'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord.'** (Isaiah 55:8) If we are not careful, therefore, what we are left with is a preconditioned way of believing in God outside of which we cannot and will not allow him to act. Where then is **'The God of Surprises?'** the God who acts according to His will and not ours. Ask yourself this question then as we celebrate the greatest feast in the Christian calendar, when was the last time your heart burned within you? When was the last time you felt touched by God's grace to the point you experienced, literally, the embrace of his gentle, all consuming love? Some people say this is not possible, faith is not like that but is this true and is that what God desires? You see the danger for us is the temptation to limit God to what we have become used to, familiar with, comfortable with, outside of which God, as far as we are concerned does not act. To do this and without realising it we are, in fact, placing limitations on God and completely and at the same time unintentionally impoverishing our own faith and how we can experience it. The key is to allow God to be God and to behave according to His will and not ours for remember the words of the Lord's Prayer, **'They will be done on earth as it is in heaven.'** (Matthew 6: 9-13) Easter takes this way of understanding our faith and blows everything apart, bringing love where there was only hate; light where

there was only darkness and life where there was only death. But nobody expected it, nobody really believed in it and nobody saw it coming for this was and is **'The God of Surprises'** in action.

Have you ever had a *'eureka moment?'* They normally come after weeks, months even years of prolonged activity. Let me give you an example, I have for many years been involved in academic work which has taken up lengthy periods of research, study, prayer, reading, reflection and eventually writing. Yet there have been times when I have metaphorically run into a brick wall. I have been trying to understand something or explain a complex issue in a straightforward way but fail to make the break-through. I get stuck, my mind goes blank and I hit a dead end. When this happens my mind ends up wondering all over the place as I try to get that break-through but nothing comes of it no matter how hard I try. The books end up not speaking to me any more and the complex issues just become too difficult to break down. The temptation at this point, to be honest, is to give up. So what do I do? For a while I do stop looking, I let go and switch off and I end up not forcing the issue anymore. When the break-through actually does come it appears to be completely at random. I might be watching a programme on television, listening to the radio, having a chance conversation with someone, reading a magazine or a newspaper or even just day dreaming but all of a sudden the penny drops, I see the way through the maze and everything falls into place. This is the *'eureka moment,'* something which appears to be completely random but which sets in motion a process which helps makes sense of a complex and perplexing set of facts which my brain found to be completely inaccessible. Hence, my reasoning or my thinking process by itself was not enough but when the trigger happened it helped me make sense out of everything. At this point remember Sir Isaac Newton? Gravity all of sudden made sense for him when, of all things, an apple fell on his head. This was his *'eureka moment.'* I can only define it as a sudden burst of realisation, which gives rise to a cry of exclamation! The key, however, to getting the point I am trying to make is that it involves some kind of catalyst, which all of a sudden sheds light on understanding something that has previously eluded you. Now I know what your are thinking, *'What has this go to do with Easter?'* Well the answer is everything. All I am asking for, at the moment, is a little patience and your willingness to allow God to be **'The God of Surprises.'**

Now let us turn our attention to the Gospel reading for Easter day, John 20:1-9. We are told, ***'It was very early on the first day of the week and still dark, when Mary of Magdala came to the tomb.'*** I cannot help but wonder what was going through Mary's mind at the time as she made that journey and what was she expecting to find? After all she saw Jesus die, saw him buried in the tomb, perhaps, even saw the stone rolled across the entrance. So then was death on her mind? Was she going to anoint the body of Jesus as the other Gospel writers tell us? Did she expect to see guards at the tomb? I cannot help but wonder about how she felt. Her heart must have been broken, perhaps she still wept and could not imagine life without her Lord. After all there is no indication at all in John that Mary had any thought whatsoever about the resurrection. Why should she? Was it because even for her there was, in fact, no place for 'The God of Surprises,' the God who acts outside of our expectations? Mary had spent a long time with Jesus and he had talked about his death and resurrection on more than one occasion but had all that been forgotten now, after all people do not rise from the dead, do they?

But then she saw something that she did not expect to see, ***'that the stone had been moved away from the tomb'*** and there were no guards. What did she think now, I wonder, that this does not make sense? But no matter what was going through her mind she did not enter the tomb, instead she ran to Peter and John and said, ***'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don't know where they have put him.'*** Notice that, once again, there is no mention of the resurrection, it was not the first thing that came to Mary's mind, instead she made the assumption that the body of Jesus must simply have been taken.

Now Peter and John rush to the tomb and on reaching it first John hesitates and does not go in. I wonder why? Why does John not run straight into the tomb looking for answers as to where the body of Jesus was? However, he does see the linen cloths lying on the ground. I wonder what he thinks now? What has happened? Where is Jesus? Who took him? I think this moment taken by John is really important as he processes not only what he is seeing but also what it actually means. Peter on the other hand does not hesitate and rushes straight in, he also sees, ***'the linen cloths on the ground and also the cloth that had been over his head.'*** At this point John finally enters the tomb and we are told that something quite remarkable happens. For a moment let us go back to that moment

of hesitation by John at the entrance to the tomb and reflect on what might have been going through his mind. Firstly, the stone had been moved and quite clearly it should not have been; this was his second surprise after Mary had told him the body of Jesus was gone. Then secondly he saw the linen cloths on the floor where they should not have been and this was his third surprise. Finally, there was no body, what Mary had told him was true. Did John now begin to put together the fragments of what Jesus had said to him all those years ago, ***'Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies it remains a single grain. But if it dies it produces much fruit.'*** (John 12: 24) and ***'And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself,'*** (12:33) *'could it be, no that would not be possible?'* With all these thoughts going through his mind John finally enters the tomb and this becomes his *'eureka moment.'* He sees the empty stone shelf on which should have laid the dead body of Jesus, he sees, once again, the linen cloths lying on the ground and suddenly they become the catalyst for his proclamation of faith because we are told, ***'he saw and he believed.'*** It is one of those moments in scripture, which should raise the hairs on the backs of our necks. ***'The God of Surprises'*** blows away all our preconceived ideas about how He should act for this God brings love where there was hatred, light where there was darkness and life where there was only death. John we are told experiences that break-through directly, all of a sudden his understanding of who God is and what God does becomes illuminated by what he sees in that empty tomb. I can only imagine John standing there dumb-founded and at the same time elated by this revelation from God. He had spent somewhere between one and three years with Jesus and now all of a sudden everything made perfect sense. As if to confirm this we are told, ***'Till this moment they had failed to understand the teaching of scripture, that he must rise form the dead.'*** The only question now remaining is, *'what does this mean for us?'*

It is vitally important not to confine the resurrection to an event, in history, which took place over 2,000 years ago. God desires that we live and move and have our being in and through Him who gives us life, ***'I have come that you may have life,'*** Jesus tells us. Now of course it is essential for us to believe that Jesus actually rose physically from the dead but equally we also need to believe that he shares that new life with us, now. That we can participate in his risen life, now and moreover

we can see signs of that risen and therefore new life everywhere. When through faith our eyes are opened something remarkable happens, something, which John in that empty tomb grasped all those centuries ago, that the resurrection must also take place in us too! Very often, though, we need that catalyst which for John was the empty tomb and the linen cloths lying on the ground. Suddenly for him everything, at last, made sense but for this to happen he had spent, as we have already said, somewhere between one and three years with Jesus. Most of us too have spent much of our lives with him and yet he still invites us to open our eyes so that we also may see and experience the resurrection in the here and now. At Easter this also should make the hairs on the back of our necks stand up as the risen Christ bursts from the tomb offering to all the gift of new life. Let us now see how this might happen for all of us in a new and exciting way.

In his book, **'True Resurrection,'** (2) Harry Williams CR makes the important point that the resurrection is something to be lived and experienced now through the eyes of faith. I remember once, for example, going for a walk and as I did so I passed a thorn bush. Then in the midst of winter we were hit with a hard ground frost, followed by a period of heavy snow. The land-scape became bleak and harsh, the thorn bush looked dead though its sharp prickles remained and I remember thinking, *'how is it possible anything could ever live under such conditions.'* Then one day as I passed the same thorn bush, in early spring, it seemed to have sprung into life and right there in the midst of it stood a single beautiful golden daffodil. Life had come out of what had appeared to be only death or putting it another way – resurrection! This is the point made by Harry Williams in his book that the resurrection is something to be lived and experienced – now. Remember what Jesus said, **'I am the resurrection and the life,'** (John 11:25) and that resurrected life came out of the darkness of the tomb. It can come out of our own darkness too. Remember that *'eureka moment'* I spoke about earlier, that's resurrection. The elderly person in the care home who never receives a single visitor but one day the local primary school turn up to play games with the residents, that's resurrection. The moment a baby is born and held for the first time by Mum and Dad and their hearts just melt, that's resurrection. To know, believe and understand that you are loved and cherished by another person who wants to spend the rest of their lives with you and you alone, that's resurrection. The child

placed with foster or adoptive parents who for the first time in their lives know that they are actually wanted for who they are, that's resurrection. Very often we do not realise it at the time, no realisation comes later, as it did with John but it's still resurrection.

We now live in difficult, even dark times and the temptation amidst the darkness of the CARONAVIRUS, COVID-19, is for some people to lose hope or even lapse into despair but God in Christ invites us, especially at Easter, to take a different course. Although we are now, metaphorically at least, in the darkness of the tomb, Christ is our light, who shines in our hearts and bids us turn to him, *'open your eyes and look at the world with the eyes of faith and see what happens,'* resurrection!

Resurrection in all those doctors and nurses who, literally, everyday are putting their own lives on the line to relieve the pain and suffering of others. I have seen exhausted doctors and nurses, living in caravans close to the hospitals where they work, going back time and time again to help others, that's resurrection. For all those key workers whether they are police officers, paramedics, postal staff, supermarket workers, those who work in care homes, lorry drivers and so on simply just carrying on so that others may live, that's resurrection. Then what about all those people who simply feel the need to say *'thank you'* to the **National Health Service** by joining in spontaneous applause, that's resurrection. Then there are all those volunteers, most of whom we will never know anything about but who simply feel compelled to put the needs of others before themselves, that to is resurrection.

You see as I said right at the beginning God is not confined to anything. God goes where he wants; God does what he wants, for God is **'The God of Surprises.'** As Christians this should fill our hearts with great joy, to see the life of God before our very eyes, risen in the service and love people are offering to each other in the darkness of the tomb. This Easter then take the time, with John, to pause at the entrance to that tomb, see the linen cloths lying on the ground, look up see and believe Christ is risen, open your eyes, embrace his resurrected life and step out of the darkness and into the light.

For,

Alleluia, Christ is risen

He is risen indeed, Alleluia

Deacon Sean

Happy Easter everyone

1. 'The God of Surprises,' by Gerard Hughes (DLT, 2008)
2. 'True Resurrection,' by Harry Williams (Mitchell Beazley, 1972)