

EASTER IN A TIME OF CRISIS

We will probably never forget this year's Lenten journey. We have spent hours sitting by our computers, watching non-stop news, calling one another, checking in. We fight watching the numbers that attest to the devastation wrought by Covid-19, but feel compelled to continue to stay informed. We long to hear even a tiny bit of good news, any statistic, that might attest to the diminishing of the power of this horrible virus. Millions of people around the world seek to understand whom to trust. False news can now have fatal consequences. Millions try not to lose hope, patience or compassion. We long to overcome our fears about the future. Thank God, clergy members and the congregation leaders of our Church and other Churches have gifted us opportunities to gather together, even as we stay apart. We grow closer to one another in the virtual world, offering encouragement as we can, that all will be well, that we have hope the crisis will end.



That first Easter? For them the death of Jesus was the end - of hope, their plans, all they had passionately longed for. Our congregations are not allowed to worship, or gather together, even in sorrow or grief. At least the disciples could be together. What did they talk about after Good Friday? Did they share memories about Jesus? Did they talk about the horror of what had happened? Did they whisper what if we are next? Will they find us? Will we suffer and die. They did not know anything for certain, except that Jesus was dead and all hope lost.

Did they repeat the words of Jesus to strengthen one another and remind them that God had a plan all along? Jesus tried to prepare them, explaining everything that was to happen. After a very meaningful discourse Jesus says: "And now I have told you this before it happens, so that when it happens you may believe." (Jn 14:29). Is it easier to live through a tragedy if we are warned it will happen? During this crisis, many have pondered whether knowing what was coming could have made a difference. The experience of the disciples might provide some further thoughts.

On the first beautiful, amazing, light and life filled victorious Easter morning, as recorded in the 24th chapter of the Gospel of Luke, the women standing by the empty tomb of Jesus are terrified by the sudden appearance of two men in dazzling garments who ask: "Why do you seek the living one among the dead? He is not here, but he has been raised. **Remember** what he said to you while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and rise on this day". And the women remembered! They ran to find the disciples. They proclaimed to them all they had witnessed. But the disciples decided their story seemed like nonsense, and they did not believe them! Peter did run and look into the tomb, saw the burial cloths alone, but left, still in disbelief.

In His mercy God reveals how even those who so faithfully followed Jesus, listened to his words, and surely loved him, struggled to believe in his resurrection and his victory over death. The gospel so truthfully reveals that when we are in terror and fear, we forget a lot! On so many Easter mornings we have joyfully sung "Alleluia!" and proclaimed the resurrection of our Lord means the death of death! This year it might be harder, separated from one another, to look into the screen and truly remember all we believe in. Many will still be praying that our loved ones, or ourselves, not get sick with Covid-19, or die, heaven forbid! It is during moments like that Jesus, indeed, takes over, comes to us and helps us remember our faith and, above all, his love!

And He is a persevering Savior! He so wants to help us believe! Easter morning the One who conquered death still had a battle on his hands - to convince his most beloved followers that he was indeed alive and they had a future and a hope! Jesus did not give up when the disciples did not believe the women. He joined two of his followers as they fled Jerusalem, enveloped in the darkness of sorrow, on their way to Emmaus. They do not recognize Jesus, but share with the 'stranger': "We were hoping that he would be the one to redeem Israel; and besides all this, it is now the third day since this took place." Jesus sighed that they did not remember God's words, but our resurrected Lord did not leave them. Journeying on with them, he patiently reminded them of all they really did know, but had forgotten. But it took an unforgettable act of grace to finally open their eyes to his identity. Abiding with the men into the evening, "it happened that, while he was with them at table, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them! With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him! And said to one another: Were not our hearts burning while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?" Suddenly they were off and running back to the place where night was slowly giving way to light. They found the disciples and proclaimed: "The Lord is risen indeed!"

Well, turns out that even the testimony of others, men or women, might not be enough! Finally Jesus comes to them, stands in their midst and says: "Peace be with you." They hear and see him, and still do not believe? They think he is a ghost. Jesus allows them to touch him and prove it to themselves. Jesus continued to try to convince them, and this time? The text says: "they still disbelieved **from joy!**" Like we do when someone gifts us something so wonderful, so undeserved and unexpected that we keep saying: I can't believe it! And that kind of joyful disbelief makes all the difference. Hard to feel it when we are in fear, but Jesus will see us through. His resurrection affirms that light is more powerful than dark, and the forgiveness of our sins through His grace, and the promise of eternal life is more powerful than death!

During this crisis life and death questions have kept us awake. We have prayed for those who are suffering, we have thanked those who selflessly risk their own lives to save others, yet thousands have died. We can walk alongside those who are in grief or disbelief as Jesus did, compassionately listening and sharing God's words of healing and hope. Our Savior conquered sin and death, so that we can know that one day we will gather us all together in his kingdom of eternal life, where will not have to distance ourselves by six feet from each other! Neither will we have to fear, that we might never again see our loved ones. May God truly quicken the end of this crisis around the world.

And on this Easter morning, if we struggle to remember all we believe and have been taught, remember one thing: Jesus will persevere. For He so wants us to believe. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life!" (Jn 3:16). Alleluia! Christ has risen! May God bless us all with a beautiful Easter, strengthened by faith and filled with peace!

In His love,
Archbishop Lauma Zusevics

Photo: pastor Biruta Puike Wilson