

## Desolation to Hope



# Preaching Resources

**CELEBRATION:**  
A Comprehensive  
Worship Resource  
CelebrationPublications.org

**ROMAN  
LECTIONARY**  
Easter Sunday  
*Acts 10:34a, 37-43*  
*Psalms 118:1-2, 16-17, 22-23*  
*Colossians 3:1-4* or  
*1 Corinthians 5:6b-8*  
*John 20:1-9*

**REVISED COMMON  
LECTIONARY**  
Easter Sunday  
*Psalms 118:1-2, 14-24*  
*Acts 10:34-43*  
*Colossians 3:1-4*  
*John 20:1-18*

**ANGLICAN  
LECTIONARY**  
Easter Sunday  
*Psalms 118:1-2, 14-24*  
*Acts 10:34-43*  
*Col 3:1-4*  
*John 20:1-10 (11-18)* or  
*Matthew 28:1-10*

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The readings for Easter Sunday seem to be a letdown from the no-holds-barred celebration of the Vigil that took us from creation through Christ's resurrection, punctuated with the new fire, bells and all those alleluias. On Easter morning the church takes a step back to say, "Now we need to think about all of this and integrate what it means." That's the process we'll be involved in for the next 50 days.

Today's selection from John's Gospel can't be considered as much more than an inconclusive resurrection account. It tells us that when Mary of Magdala and Peter and "the other disciple whom Jesus loved" saw the empty tomb, the beloved disciple "believed" but that none of them understood, leaving us with Mary Magdalen's core question: "Where is the Lord?"

*Easter faith  
is a slow  
journey from  
desolation to  
hope.*

One message this Gospel brings home is that our alleluias may be too facile. The disciples who knew Jesus most intimately were devastated at his death and confounded by the first signs of resurrection. Because of that it's probably a very good thing for us to be left with Mary at this point in her experience. If we can't imagine her devastation, we'll never understand her Easter joy.

When we read the resurrection Gospels objectively we realize that the empty tomb didn't prove anything. Far from being a sign of hope, it was more like a doubling down on the disciples' depression. The only really good news in this selection is that the beloved disciple "saw and believed," but what exactly he believed remains unclear. At best, he believed that Jesus had returned to the Father, a situation that did little to address the bitter angst of the question Mary represented for all of them, "What happened to the Lord?" along with, "What does it mean for us?"

In the face of that question, the Letter to the Colossians tells us to seek what is above. While that might sound like a prescription to imbibe in a good dose of denial, in reality it's exactly the opposite. The author who writes in Paul's name tells us to fix our hearts and minds on Christ who is seated at the right hand of the Father. That will sound like pie in the sky until we remember what the early church would have envisioned when they heard it. Rather than picturing Christ the King robed in fine liturgical vestments, their image of the risen Lord had hands, feet and side scarred by the crucifixion. The original evangelizers had vivid memories of the man who had been beaten, mocked and spat upon, the one who had somehow found the breath and spirit to forgive his enemies as he died at their hands. When the early Christians set their minds on what was above they saw the innocent victim, now risen and continuing to share the power of God's invincible love.

Experts say that addicts can't be helped until they have "hit bottom." In the same way, only those who have endured a measure of Christ's passion or suffered in solidarity with those who have can fully appreciate what it means to "think of what is above, not what is on earth." In this sense, earth is the realm of injustice, envy and lies. It is the sphere in which Mary wandered on that first morning, the place of cruelty on top of death.

We know that later on that first day Mary would encounter Christ and would have her eyes raised to a different plane. As Paul says, Christ her life was about to appear and transform her imagination. As a result of her encounter with her risen Lord, she would begin to understand how



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## Easter

### Easter Sunday

#### *Desolation to Hope*



Christ's resurrection changes everything. The wounds of Jesus had not disappeared, but they did not define him and the forgiveness he offered promised that those wounds need not define those who inflicted them. As she grasped this reality she was envisioning "what is above."

John and Paul convey this mystery in heady language. In today's first reading Peter says it more simply. He tells the bare bones story of Jesus and does his best to explain the resurrection. What it all comes down to for Peter is that knowing Jesus and meeting him as risen Lord converted him and his fellow witnesses into apostles, people who continued Jesus' own mission of proclaiming forgiveness.

Today's readings offer us a variety of approaches to the Easter mystery. They invite us to consider our own experience as a Gospel to be shared. We may know Easter faith as a slow journey from desolation to hope. It may be a vision of transformed reality that orients us to live each day from above. It can also be like Peter's simple response, "We knew it, saw it, and now must proclaim it." There are many models, and ours will probably grow and change. What is essential is our response to the question: "What does it mean for us?"

#### **ACTS 10:34A, 37-43**

This reading, Peter's last missionary speech takes place in the house of Cornelius, the Gentile who is coming into the Christian fold. But our reading concentrates on the speech rather than the context. Peter's homily is actually a very short summary of faith in Christ, proclaimed to people who apparently already knew the basic message Peter was talking about, but for whom Peter — or Luke who published the homily — wanted to focus the message. In some ways this is a summary of Luke's Gospel, even following the geographical pattern from Galilee to Jerusalem and the timing from John the Baptist through the Resurrection. But true to his purpose in writing Acts, Luke demonstrates through the work of

the early church that Jesus' project would continue to spread to all cultures and to the ends of the earth.

Peter's mention of Jesus' anointing is probably a reference to his baptism, interpreting the idea as less dependent on oil than on God's favor resting on him. Addressing a Gentile audience, the word Luke had Peter use for "doing good" was one which was often applied to the beneficial deeds of kings, an allusion that would not have been lost on the original audience. The idea of anointing and doing good placed Jesus in the context of the long-awaited king who would bring justice.

In addition to "doing good," Peter says that Jesus healed all those oppressed by the devil. The word used for oppression was generally used to describe the plight of the poor at the hands of the wealthy, thereby implying that the healing Jesus did freed people from demonic influence, including fear of death. While we might take that as a foray into the world of myth, we could also think of it as the way Peter would describe what happened to him as a result of his relationship with Jesus. After all, the whole point of Peter's preaching was to share the good news that had

changed his life.

What had changed in Peter's life? Perhaps more than anything else, he became free from the fear that had controlled him. Peter was the disciple who had insisted on shielding Jesus from harm — refusing to accept that Jesus should suffer, and later by wielding his sword when Jesus was arrested. But then when he was unarmed he feared to admit that he knew Jesus, the prisoner. Additionally, it's not hard to believe that Peter's habitual vociferous bravado had more than a little to do with hidden fear.

The Peter we hear in this homily is different. His focus is on the message about Jesus, not himself. Additionally, while he does not shy from mentioning Jesus' crucifixion, he says much more about what Jesus did before and after his resurrection. Peter's fear has been overcome. He is willing and able to preach even though followers of Jesus are already being persecuted. Even more, he is able to change his certainties and doesn't have to cling to what he thought was right. This very homily came about as the result of his accepting Gentiles into the fold.

Peter ends his homily by telling his hearers that belief in Jesus brings forgiveness of sins. That's exactly what Peter has experienced. The risen Christ had sought him out with a message of peace. Peter is no longer defined by his past and has no fear about the future. That is good news he cannot keep to himself.

#### **COL 3:1-4**

At the time of the Ascension, Luke has the angels ask the disciples, "Why are you looking up?" The idea was that they should stop sky-gazing and get to work on the mission. In today's selection from Colossians, Paul (or his surrogate) gives the opposite advice: "Seek what is above."

The exhortations are not really opposed to one another. Luke's angels are telling the disciples that they can't just sit around waiting for Jesus to return. Paul is orienting them for their mission.



Some commentaries talk about this selection as “apocalyptic,” a type of literature that looks to the end times and the final, often bloody, victory of good over evil. An alternative view is to see this as eschatological, thereby putting the emphasis on the goal of history. Both look to the end, the first with dramatic foreboding and the promise of cataclysm, and the latter, at least as proposed in this reading, as the coming resolution of everything in Christ.

### JN 20:1-9

The Gospel of John is coming to an end. John’s reflection opened with the words: “In the beginning.” With that John signaled that what followed would contemplate God’s work of creation as an ongoing activity of love that came to fulfillment when Jesus, raised up on the cross, proclaimed, “It is finished.” The next scene opens in the early morning “on the first day” of God’s new creation.

John wants us to notice that it was still dark when Mary saw that the tomb’s stone had been moved. That stone, like the one in the story of Lazarus, symbolized the incontrovertible power of death. The stone was immovable, proclaiming that the seal had been fixed, the story of Jesus’ life had run its course and the conclusion was obvious.

While in the dark, Mary saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. It made no sense. She might as well have seen the sun rising in the west or rain rising from the grass toward the clouds. There was but one logical conclusion: Some enemy decided to guarantee an end to even the memory of Jesus by desecrating his resting place. Mary had been the first to decide to honor Jesus’ memory by visiting his tomb. When even that possibility was ripped from her she ran to the disciples. Finding Peter and another disciple she gave them her interpretation of the events: Some unnamed “they” were prolonging the humiliation of the crucifixion by stealing the broken body of their beloved Lord.

The two of them ran back with Mary, prepared to see destruction on

top of death. The one peeked into the tomb, but allowed Peter to go in first. It was not a robbery—everything was well placed, just not in any conceivable order. The scene was contrasted to that of Bethany where Lazarus was raised but had to be released from all the accoutrements of death. In Jesus’ tomb the burial linens were there to see and the veil that had covered his head was placed to make it clear that it was unneeded. The evangelist says that the beloved disciple followed Peter into the tomb to see all of this and that unlike Peter he “believed.” But John immediately qualifies that statement by reminding us that, “they did not yet understand the Scripture that he had to rise from the dead.”

In her book, *Written That You May Believe*, Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Sandra Schneiders helps us understand that enigmatic situation by suggesting that when the beloved disciple looked at the face veil in the tomb he saw a sign, a revelation of Jesus’ glorification. The face veil, a real part of the burial dress, called to mind the veil with which Moses had covered his face in Exodus 34:33-35. As Schneiders points out the beloved disciple saw in that discarded veil a sign that “the new Moses has definitely put aside the veil of his flesh as he ascends into the presence of God to receive ... that glory which he had with the Father before the world was made.”

In a paradoxical way, Mary’s assumption that the empty tomb was a continuation of the mystery of the cross was correct. But she was misinterpreting the mystery of the cross by seeing it as death and humiliation rather than glorification. According to John’s Gospel, the moment of Jesus’ death was the moment of his ascension to the Father. Jesus had explained that more than once while he was with them. (See John 3:14, 8:28, 12:32.) What the beloved disciple believed was that the cast-off face veil represented Jesus’ return to the Father. He would never again be among them in mortal flesh.

This is the beginning of Easter faith; it recalls what Jesus said at the Last Supper: “I came from the Father and have come into the world. Now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father” (John 16:28). The beloved disciple believed that Jesus the Christ had risen, that he is the Son of God whose life and death definitively reveal who God is. The beginning of Easter faith was this belief about what had happened to Jesus. What would fill out that faith would be the experience that taught the disciples what Jesus’ resurrection meant for them. That part of the story begins as soon as the two male disciples return home and Mary meets the risen Christ in the garden.

## Sermon Starters

*Deacon Dick Folger*

As we struggle to comprehend the great mystery of Christ’s resurrection, we find clues in all the Gospels which are proclaimed on this day.

If there were a trial to prove the Resurrection, the interrogating attorney might call upon the apostle John and Jesus’ other disciples as witnesses to this extraordinary event: “Mr. John, according to the New American Bible translation, you tell us the burial cloths of Jesus were found in the tomb. Then you say the burial cloth that covered Jesus’ head was rolled up in a separate place. Are you implying that Jesus himself rolled up that cloth?”

The attorney might further interrogate by saying: “Mr. Cleopas, in the account of these events written by Mr. Luke, is it true that you encountered Jesus on the way to Emmaus from Jerusalem?”

If you were the foreman of the jury, what verdict will you give in this case regarding the resurrection of Jesus Christ?