

FR JUSTIN FORD, HOMILY, EASTER VIGIL, 11<sup>TH</sup> APRIL 2020

‘He is not here, for he has risen, as he said he would.’ This night is the greatest of feasts, and the climax of the Church’s year, when we rejoice in the crowning truth of our faith in Christ.

Now, we’ve never experienced an Easter like this one before, where our churches are closed, where we can’t gather as we normally do. But the way so many parishes have taken up the livestreaming, and how many Catholics, how many Christians, all round the world really, have been tuning into that, shows us that nothing can stop us celebrating the central event of human history. In the Resurrection, we see God’s defeat of death and sin, and the glorification of Christ, who passed through agony and death to set the world free.

For the women at the tomb in the gospel account, and for the disciples after them, the sign of the empty tomb is the start of their realisation of the amazing truth, which’ll be confirmed by the appearances of Jesus in his risen and glorified body. After their initial resistance to belief, their experiences of the risen Jesus will make them witnesses of Easter faith and joy.

Witnesses of the truth they become so convinced of, that they’re willing to spend the rest of their lives spreading that truth and living according to it. And they keep to that witness even when it means persecution and, for many of them, martyrdom. Then those who hear them and believe become witnesses in their turn, and their witness has come across the centuries to us. And now we too have heard the good news and believed, and today, we are the witnesses to the Risen Lord.

But what is it that we’re witnesses to? Certainly, that Jesus returned to life in that same body which died upon the cross and was buried in the tomb. But his resurrection wasn’t a return to ordinary earthly life, like Lazarus. When Jesus rose, his body was glorified, made into something new and wonderful. We see signs of that in the mysterious nature of his appearances, for example, when sometimes, his followers don’t recognise him at first, or when he suddenly appears inside the locked room where the disciples are gathered. And in fact, his resurrection to glorified life is the beginning of the new creation, the new heavens and the new earth breaking through into our universe.

We start to share in that new creation by being united with Christ, first in baptism and then in our whole lives of faithful discipleship. And one day, God willing, we’ll share in it fully, if we persevere to the end. Firstly, that’ll be in our souls, when we enter everlasting union with God in heaven. And then finally in our own glorified bodies, when through the power of Christ’s Resurrection we ourselves rise again on the last day.

So that’s our wonderful hope for the future, the new creation which began at the first Easter. But Easter transforms our lives even now. Christ’s death destroyed our sinfulness, his rising to life raises us to the new life of divine grace and love. And the resurrection even transforms our suffering: it means that in union with Jesus, nothing that we suffer is meaningless or wasted. But like the suffering of Jesus, it now carries within it the power of resurrection, spiritual power for the world, and the seed of a heavenly reality beyond anything we can imagine.

And when we realise this, nothing can defeat us. Every cross becomes a pathway to new life. And when things seem darkest and without hope, we remember that we have a God who rose from the dead. From the greatest evil, and what must have seemed like the greatest despair, came the greatest good and the greatest hope. The death and resurrection of Christ have the power to turn around all the evil in our lives, all the evil of the whole of human history, because they possess unlimited divine value. And so they become the unfailing source of mercy and healing for the world.

In our joy we now move towards the climax of our celebration, our evening sacrifice of praise, the Sacrifice of the Mass, in which we offer God supreme praise and thanksgiving, by joining again in the sacrifice of Christ himself, truly present. 'All time belongs to him and all the ages; to him be glory and power, through every age and for ever. Amen.'