

As you know, Easter is a movable feast. Last year, it was very early. I was particularly mindful of this because I arrived in La Jolla, mid-January. The second Sunday was the Annual meeting. Then it was Ash Wednesday and before my feet had hardly touched the ground, we were celebrating Easter. It's been a great year since then. I know this is the place that God has called me to be. It's been a good year but not without its challenges. I've been hospitalized twice in that year and I've had to call upon every emergency service except the Coast Guard. In fact, if it wasn't for a man at Windansea Beach, I might not even be legal to say that. On my first weekend at La Jolla, I got my swimming gear and went down to Windansea for a quick dip. I thought it'd be a good cure for jetlag. I did notice the sea looked a bit rough but didn't take any notice of that. I got changed and went out to some rocks to jump in and I heard somebody shout at me, "Are you mad?"

I said, "No, I'm English." He said, "Do you not have rip currents in England?" If it wasn't for him, I might have had a royal flush of emergency services in my first year here. Now, I'll tell you this. As a gospel reading from St. John that we just heard records the central event of the Christian faith, the resurrection of Jesus. What makes it feel real and true to me is that it has these challenging elements to it. Even though it's the very center of the faith, it still is a story with rough edges. This is not a fairytale or a legend. It has elements that you can see somebody else might have taken out. They're clearly eyewitness events that are being recorded. It has this ring of authenticity and reality to it. It's a strangely underwhelming story, in some ways. Because when our gospel begins, the resurrection's already happened and nobody noticed.

In fact, of the 18 verses of our reading, it's not until verse 16 that anybody realizes that Jesus has actually risen from the dead. Then it ends and there are tears and misunderstanding. It ends with this negative imperative. "Do not hold onto me." If this story were being created in Hollywood, it would be so different. For one thing, the end of our story where Jesus is recognized by Mary would be followed by a warm embrace. If it was being filmed in England, there'd at least be a firm handshake between Mary and Jesus. Either way, Jesus wouldn't say, "Don't hold me." Like all the resurrection stories, it's complex but has this authentic feel, with challenging elements. All the resurrection stories raise as many questions as they answer. I want to pick up on one of those challenging themes, namely the theme of emptiness. The focus of the resurrection story is the empty tomb.

Normally, emptiness is not a good thing. If you're driving a car and the tank is empty, means you run out of gas. I'm an empty nester. That doesn't always feel great. Sometimes it does, but not always. If I said I felt empty inside, that's a bad thing. You'd feel sorry for me. Today, we celebrate the fact that the tomb is empty. That, for us, is a source of great hope. In 1977, Archbishop Janani Luwum was murdered in Uganda on the order of the president. President Idi Amin. Unlike Pontius Pilate, Amin refused to have the body of the Archbishop released for burial. Which was unfortunate because thousands of people had gathered at the Cathedral for his funeral. The mood, there, was turning rather ugly. It could have got really bad but, all of a sudden, the mood changed from one of protest to celebration.

Because people suddenly realized the significance of them all being there to celebrate this funeral of the Archbishop, gathered around a hole in the ground. Because his tomb had been cut, but it was empty. Someone spoke out the words that the angels spoke in another gospel to the women who'd gone to find Jesus. "Why do you seek the living amongst the dead?" A song broke out in response. "Glory, glory, hallelujah. Glory, glory to the lamb. All the cleansing blood has reached me. Glory, glory to the lamb." The crowd had realized the significance of what was happening. The Archbishop's grave was empty. Which is the hope, on this Easter day, for all God's people. That the graves will be empty. It should be said that the first disciples were confused by the empty tomb of Jesus. None of them went from seeing the empty tomb straight to a belief that Jesus had been raised from the dead.

The first thought they had is that someone had stolen the body. The empty tomb did not prove to them that Jesus had been raised from the dead. What proved it to them was the personal encounter that Mary had with the risen Christ. It was when he called her by name that she realized that he'd been raised. Mary didn't run back to the disciples and say, "The tomb is empty." She ran back to the disciples and said, "I have seen the Lord." The fact that Mary recognized Jesus after mistaking him for the gardener shows that Jesus had a physical form. Not the same as his former form. We are told elsewhere that Jesus would not be constrained by the walls of the tomb. Which begs the question, why was the stone, which was covering the tomb, rolled away? Have you ever wondered? The stone was rolled away, I think not so that Jesus could get out but rather that the disciples could look in.

The empty tomb is an invitation. An invitation to explore this great truth and wonder of the resurrection of Christ Jesus. You know what it's like, you might have had this experience of walking along the beach. All of a sudden you see a black hole in a cave under the cliff. If you're anything like me, I have to pop my head into that hole. I just can't walk past without knowing what's inside. The empty tomb is like that. There's that pull to go and explore this empty tomb and explore the mystery of the resurrection faith. It doesn't prove anything on its own but it invites us to ask questions. To seek the encounter with the risen Lord Jesus which is compelling.

I've one final thought about the empty tomb. After the resurrection, the first experience that the disciples have is not of the risen presence of Jesus. It's of his absence. They ran to the tomb and found it empty. I was in Borrego Springs a few weeks ago. I've been there several times before but this time, as some of you know, it's full of beautiful, colorful, abundant flowers. Who'd have thought that possible? Who'd have thought that a place that's normally so barren and dry and empty could be so full of color and life? To me, it was an image of our Easter faith. Our resurrection hope isn't that the valley will always be full of flowers. It's that we know it can be and that one day it will be. Because of the resurrection, we can be sure that death, barrenness, emptiness, will not be the last word. Death has been defeated. A new life has been opened up for us by the resurrection of Christ Jesus. His resurrection changes everything.

I'll leave you with an invitation. An invitation to explore the empty tomb. Step inside. See if it leads, as it did for Mary, to an encounter with the risen Lord Jesus.

Hallelujah, Christ is risen!  
The Lord is risen indeed! Hallelujah!