



Easter Homily

April 12, 2020

Cardinal Seán P. O'Malley, OFM Cap
Archdiocese of Boston, MA

There is a Franciscan tradition that the risen Christ appeared first of all to his mother. It would've been a very private, intimate setting, not documented in the Gospels. The Gospels do not record every incident in Jesus's life. His encounter with Mary is a tradition supported by the logic of love and devotion. Hence in many Spanish-speaking countries, the Easter procession is called the Encuentro, the meeting of Jesus and Mary. Typically, the men accompany the statue of the risen Christ and in another procession the women accompany the statue of the sorrowful mother. When the two processions meet the black mantle covering the sorrowful mother is removed and underneath Mary is wearing a beautiful white raiment that betokens the joy of Easter. The same mystery, or event, the meeting of Jesus and Mary after the Resurrection is the sixth joyful mystery of the Franciscan rosary.

However, in the Gospels when they want to record Jesus first meeting, they chose to cast Mary Magdalene in that role. Jesus said he came to call sinners, and so it is very fitting that the first apparition recorded in the gospel is to a woman who had been possessed by seven devils. Likewise, the last apparition of the risen Christ in the New Testament is to a sinner called to conversion, Saul. The risen Christ appears to the Pharisee Saul who is persecuting the Christians in Damascus. The risen Christ says to Saul who was later St. Paul, the apostle, "*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*" These words were an invitation to St. Paul to realize that when you persecute the church you are persecuting Christ, because the Church and Christ are one. Later on, Paul in his epistles describes the church as the body of Christ. Paul is converted by this encounter with the risen Christ, and because he has seen the risen Christ, Paul becomes himself an apostle in a community of forgiven sinners.



Mary Magdalene is also been called an apostle because of her encounter with the risen Lord. When Peter the and the apostles fled into the witness protection program, Mary Magdalene followed Jesus all the way to Calvary. It is interesting to note that so often when artists depict the crucifixion scene, they show the blessed mother standing on one side of the cross, John the beloved disciple standing on the other side of the cross, and in the center, kneeling clinging to Jesus's feet is the figure of Mary Magdalene. When Lazarus' sister, Mary, sat at Jesus' feet listening to his words while Martha prepared the meal, Martha complained but Jesus said Mary has chosen the best part. It will not be taken away from her. The best part for the disciple is to be at the feet of the master, always learning, always attentive, always near.

Today's gospel begins with Mary Magdalene setting out before dawn to visit the tomb of Jesus. She had to wait until the Sabbath was over to be able to walk that distance. When she gets there, she discovers that the tomb has been opened and the body is gone. She is distressed, surely thinking that the tomb has been desecrated by enemies of Jesus. Overcome with grief she runs to the city to tell Peter and John what she has found. I hate to say this, but I don't think Peter and John would've gone to the tomb on Easter Sunday had they not been shamed into it by Mary Magdalene and her report that the tomb was empty. They were too busy practicing social distancing and were so frightened of the possibility of being discovered that I'm sure they would gladly have worn facemasks.

The three of them rush back to the tomb. It was a journey of faith for the three of them. When they saw the borrowed tomb where Joseph of Arimathea had buried Jesus, they were experiencing the first signs of the Resurrection that come with the new light of day as they move out of darkness and unbelief. We see Peter and John entering the tomb with Mary Magdalene. In my office, I have a photograph of the holy sepulcher, that very same tomb where I celebrated mass with the group a Boston priests, packed in there like sardines. It was a thrilling experience to enter the empty tomb and know that our Redeemer lives. He has conquered sin and death. In the photograph you can see that the tomb is crowded with joyful disciples because the master is risen and is alive.

Today's Gospel says that when John saw the burial cloth and the cloth that covered Jesus's head folded in a separate place, he begins to believe, even though the disciples did not yet understand the Scripture that Christ had to rise from the dead. After this, the gospel records that John and Peter returned to the city where later that same day, the risen Lord will seek them out with the other apostles in their hiding place.

But Mary Magdalene who followed Jesus through the way of the cross, who clung to the foot of the cross on Calvary, who participated in his burial, who was the first to arrive on Easter morning at the tomb, she did not leave. She was not going anywhere. It was then that the risen Christ appeared to her, to Mary Magdalene, his first official apparition on Easter Sunday. He called her by name, and immediately she threw herself at his feet and clung to his feet, just as she had done at Calvary. Always the posture of the faithful disciple. But having seen the risen Christ and heard his words, she becomes his apostle sent to take the good news to the other apostles. The tomb is empty because Jesus is alive, risen from the dead. No one stole His body.

The power of the Resurrection changes one's prospective and how we see life. We no longer need to fear death. Knowing the Resurrection means receiving a mission to live the life of the Resurrection and witness to the world that Christ lives, he loves us, he forgives us, he redeems us. The church exists to witness this great truth of Easter. Without Easter there is no church.

Easter is the most important event in the history of the world. Other events are marked by annual observances, both civic and religious. Hence, once a year we celebrate Christmas, once a year we celebrate Fourth of July, our Independence Day. But Easter is different. We have a weekly observance--we celebrate the Lord's Resurrection each Sunday as a reminder that it is the most important event in our history and in our lives. If the whole Bible were lost but the Easter Gospel were saved, we would still have the Good News. We might ask ourselves how 12 uneducated fishermen did this. A tax collector and peasants from backwater villages in a conquered country, without smartphones, they established a religion that embrace billions of people, one-third of the inhabitants of the world. The answer is the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. His Resurrection has changed everything. The Resurrection has divided history, not just our calendar into BC and AD.

On Easter, the Lord is inviting us to emerge from the tomb, to walk in the light, to know that the world can never be the same because he has conquered sin and death for all of us. In our own lives, no matter how far we are from the Lord, Easter is an invitation... to draw near to gaze into the empty tomb, to put our fingers in the place of the nails, to renew our baptismal vows, and to know that we are part of Christ's family. Easter is an invitation to new life, to a new beginning. Easter means that life and love are forever, nothing else matters.

When the risen Lord meets anyone in the Gospels, they are given a task, the task is to join the announcement, to be witnesses to the new life that is offered by Jesus Christ. Even when persecuted, the Church bears witness in its joy, overcoming

fear in worship... in the midst of war, in famine, and during a pandemic. In Haiti, after the earthquake, I was so moved by the faith of those thousands of Haitians living in refugee camps where for hours into the night, the people could be heard singing God's praises and lifting their voice in prayer--because in the face of death and destruction, their faith in the risen Lord gave them hope and joy.

At Easter, we celebrate that new life that Jesus gives us. We witness to it when we insist that money isn't our ruler, that self-promotion isn't our King, that pleasure isn't a fulfilling aim, and that the ruthless individualism of our age can never bring happiness. The new life of Christ has broken into our world; it cannot be contained, nor restricted nor managed.

In Goethe's book, *Faust*, there is a dramatic scene where Faust is overcome with depression and sadness. He is contemplating suicide when, suddenly, he hears the Easter bells, the community of faith celebrating the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. The sound pulls him back from the edge and gives him hope. Today in Massachusetts all of the Christian churches are ringing their bells as a sign of the hope and joy that Easter brings us.

Today we hear the Easter bells as a call to solidarity among all the members of our community. (This is) so that, in the face of the pandemic, we might respond to witness the power of the Resurrection, the power of love that is stronger than death, and faith in a provident God who can always bring good out of evil.

To know the risen Lord, is to know his love, and his invitation to lead a better life, to treat each other with greater respect and concern. To know Jesus' Resurrection is to begin to understand that we, too, are going to live forever. In the light of the Resurrection, our lives must change. We must move beyond the materialism and individualism of our culture and embrace our mission to (give) witness to the good news and make God's kingdom more visible by the way that we love, forgive, care for each other, and serve one another--especially those who are sick and suffering.

The Resurrection assures us that there is life beyond the cross; there is meaning to suffering; that love is stronger than death. If Easter is about being surprised by joy, it's also about sharing the good news and the joy that our Redeemer lives. Mary Magdalene ran to tell the people. Let's stop dragging our feet, we must share the good news too.