Easter 2015

I can relate to the not understanding. I didn’t understand the first time I visited the empty tomb either.

The first time I went to the Holy Land was on my sabbatical. In the weeks before arriving in Israel, our group traveled in the footsteps of St. Paul, through Asia Minor. With those ancient sites, often the excavations were out in the wide open countryside, little left but a few foundations, a bit of a wall here, a pillar there, at best a shell of an ancient building.

I hadn’t read up enough about the church of the Holy Sepulchre to understand what I would experience. The site of Jesus’ tomb had been outside the walls on an open hilltop in Jesus’ day. But Jerusalem has expanded many times through the centuries, with the new walls encompassing more and more of the environs. So now, the tomb is inside the walls of the old city, with a Basilica enclosing it. To get to the empty tomb, you have to navigate a warren of narrow, crowded streets, lined with shops. Ah, the shop keepers! Some great lines to get you into the store. “Please come in. You are my first customer today, everything is free!” or, my favorite, “How can I cheat you today?” So you weave your way into an incredibly ornate, byzantine church, and then after standing in line, you eventually get into the little chapel built over the tomb. A very different picture than a cave in a garden with a large stone to seal the entrance. Very different than what I was expecting!

Mary Magdalene and the two disciples she fetched, Peter and the other disciple, didn’t find what they expected either. They were expecting to see a sealed tomb, their beloved rabbi, teacher and friend lifeless inside, in short, they were expecting a place of heartbreaking sorrow.

Instead they found an open and empty tomb, neatly placed grave wrappings, evidence that something incredible must have happened; they found a place practically pulsating with hope.

Before continuing, let’s look back over the last few weeks of Lent.

Four weekends ago we heard of the Samaritan woman at the well. She was expecting another dreary day; fetch the water, use it up, trudge back to the well tomorrow. One day just like the next. Did she ever get a surprise, and a gift, in her chance encounter with Jesus!

Then we had that man born blind. He was hoping, expecting, that with any luck, those passing by might give him some alms, so he could buy a bit of food. Instead, HE was given his sight!

Next, we heard how Mary and Martha had hoped that Jesus would come and heal their dear brother Lazarus before it was too late. Once Lazarus died, they most likely hoped that when Jesus arrived, he might offer them some comfort in their sorrow. Instead, Jesus gave them their brother back alive. Imagine!

Each account reveals that when we encounter Jesus, amazing things can happen. Unexpected. Life-changing.

We can be given living water. Not the kind one dips up from a well, outside. The kind that springs up inside of us, quenching the deepest thirst.
We can discover we have been blind to so many things going on around us. To all manner of spiritual realities. Truly encounter Jesus, and we can have our eyes opened, when we least expect it. Jesus opens up new worlds for us.

In the Gospel of Lazarus, and today, we discover that not even death is predictable when Jesus comes into the picture! Let me repeat that. Not even death is predictable when Jesus comes into the picture. Rather than a dead end, death becomes a doorway into new life!

I am so glad you are here today!

Christ not only rose from the dead. He is here when we gather in his name. He is definitely here with us this Easter. And amazing things can happen.

If you are here because something drew you, there is just a bit of spiritual thirst going on, some hunger for deeper meaning in life, and you thought you might check us out …. I hope and pray that the Lord starts speaking to you about living water. Instead of thinking about a non-edifying conversation at the water cooler, I hope you experience a life changing conversation with Jesus at the well, or the font, let’s say. Even if it is just one word, or phrase, or image, I pray the conversation will begin.

If you are here often, and have celebrated Easter for decades, you may not be expecting any surprises. Perfect. Neither was that man born blind. I hope you see something that you have never noticed before. A person with a cane, painfully coming forward for communion, joyful, grateful for the opportunity. A prayer you never heard quite that way before. A song. A gesture. Something that strikes a deep chord. I hope and pray lots of eyes and ears are opened a bit wider this Easter Sunday.

If your faith has been suffering a bit, almost dying, because of heavy burdens you have been carrying, sorrows, hardships: I hope and pray your surprise is hearing Jesus call you by name. As he called Lazarus, may he call you: Come out! Jesus does that in very unexpected ways here, and it could well happen this morning. Or instead, perhaps like Martha and Mary, you have been grieving, feeling an emptiness, a seemingly untouchable sorrow. I pray he will reassure you that the one you so miss is now breathing with God’s breath, enjoying the eternal Easter.

If you are here basically because you do like to go to church on the major feasts, it’s a comfortable habit … I hope and pray something unlikely happens this Easter, that makes you a bit UN comfortable. But that in the process, I hope and pray that discomfort leads you to recalculate, and puts you on the path to the joy of the Gospel.

Back to my first visit to the Holy Sepulchre, yes, I was scandalized by the gold and glitter, the chaos, the distractions. But staying in Jerusalem for some time, I had the opportunity to return. Each time the experience changed. What were distractions I began to recognize as the build-up, over the centuries, as many people, of diverse cultures, have tried their best to respond with gratitude to the victory over death and the path to eternal life that Jesus’ three days in the tomb represent. Rather than distractions from faith, I began to see so many things as evidence of faith.
Back to Mary Magdalen, Peter and John. At the surface level, they were expecting the tomb to be a place of sorrow. But I get the sense that deep down, way deep down, there was a spark of hope, a prayer even. “Lord, you spoke so powerfully about the future. How could it end this way? You taught us so much about second chances, about holding on to hope, about the wonders God can do each and every day; you taught us that miracles are real. Please, we need a miracle now.” The first miracle: the empty tomb, transformed from a dead end to a doorway to hope. Another miracle: Jesus appearing to them, showing his hands and side, reassuring them. Then sharing meals with them. Breathing the Holy Spirit upon them. Sending them forth with incredible Good News.

Take a look beyond the surface in your life today. What are some of your deepest hopes? The Lord wants to take us all far beyond our meager expectations. He wants us to all discover that a tomb where some part of ourselves may be buried, some hope lost, some dream blocked off need not remain sealed. The Lord can roll back the stone. He holds the power of release, or resurrection. He can raise up and release that part of us, that hope, that sense that God is real, despite our doubts, beyond our disappointments. God loves us through it all, journeys with us through life. God can and will make us whole again, just as one day he can raise us to eternal life.

See and believe, and the next thing you know, Easter will never be the same.

I really am glad you are here today. God bless you all this Easter, and always.

May we all not only find the tomb empty. May we come to understand the scriptures. May that lead us to experience his presence, and enable us to sharing a meal with Jesus and his friends today, and often in the days ahead. The Lord is truly risen. Alleluia!