

For an Easter Sunday gospel, this reading leaves a lot to be desired. There isn't a lot of evidence here that Jesus has been raised. We have an empty tomb, puzzled women, some very odd words from two men in white garments, and skeptical apostles. Peter runs to the tomb, checks it out, and goes home amazed at what had happened. Jesus doesn't even appear on the scene until two verses later, after this Gospel passage ends. Why does the Church stop the reading here, leaving us hanging, wondering?

Well, Easter is all about *hope*. You could reasonably say that it is about faith or love, and you wouldn't be wrong, but hope rings as the most authentic virtue at work here. Why? To answer that, let's approach it from the dark side. What is the opposite of hope? (repeat) The most common answer is *despair*. But that's not quite accurate. Despair is too dramatic a term. The opposite of hope is actually *anxiety*. Anxiety. Does that surprise you? Let's look at it this way. On one end of the spectrum you have despair. On the other end of the spectrum you have the carefree presumption that nothing can ever go wrong. Neither end is the place to be. Hope lives in the middle, sliding up and down the scale, matched in perfect opposition to anxiety, which also slides up and down the scale. As hope goes up, anxiety goes down. As anxiety goes up, a feeling of hopelessness permeates us. If we lose all hope, we are so filled with anxiety that we are in despair. If we are completely worry free, we err on the side of recklessness, which is just as dangerous. So a well-balanced person is in the middle somewhere, holding the tension of hope and anxiety together.

Peter, in our Gospel, is exactly at this point, isn't he? A good word for it is "amazed". Amazement carries a tinge of excitement, danger, and the hope for something more, something better. After the last three days of near-despair for Peter, and the great anxiety that death by crucifixion may be waiting for him too, Peter looking at that empty tomb is now faced with a completely different possibility. Are the women who reported back to the apostles right? Is it possible that Jesus has actually risen?! Can he believe it? Dare he hope for it? What happens next? He is quivering with excitement, amazement, hope, and yes, maybe even some anxiety.

We're over two thousand years from this event. I would dare to say that life is exactly like this for all of us. Whether we are people of deep faith, or simply people of engrained habit, we come to the Easter celebration because we want to be reassured that life has a purpose, that it doesn't end here, that something incredible is in store. We so much want that to be true, yet we wonder, we are concerned, we worry. Maybe you are on the lower end of that sliding scale, a little too close to despair. Perhaps you've had some hard knocks lately, you wonder if this Gospel, like so many come-ons in life, is too good to be true.

*Easter is about hope.* If you're over-indulging in alcohol, if you're experimenting with drugs, if you're fighting addictions to any number of seemingly good things that have a nasty way of hooking you, this day is for you. If you're working too hard, buying stuff you don't need, eating too much, envying too much, this day is for you. All of these bad habits are manifestations of anxiety, all of them stem from an uneasy sense that we're not complete, that something important is missing.

*Easter is about hope.* If you're battling anxiety for any number of good reasons – kids, jobs, parents, school – take a moment to consider the other side of the scale. Hope springs eternal, we are told. That's a very theological statement, actually. And just as darkness can never overwhelm the light, so anxiety can never truly overwhelm hope in God. If you can truly come to believe that God loves you without any hesitation, without any conditions, without any need for you to prove yourself, how can you be anxious? How can you be anxious? See? I just saved you several thousand dollars of therapy!

*Easter is about hope.* Through the saving act of Jesus, we are assured that the world has been saved, but it seems that God wants each of us to come to that discovery on our own. The Kingdom of God is both here and not yet here. It is finished and yet in process. It is a paradox, because God is so above us that we cannot understand it all. A famous theologian puts it well: "The Resurrection of Jesus is the first fruits of the kingdom, God's *down payment* on the promise." As all of us know, a down payment is made to guarantee the rest. This down payment, the resurrection of Jesus, shows God at work in the most hopeless of human situations, the crucifixion of his innocent Son. If God can bring life from death, is there anything we can bring before God that he cannot likewise transform? If God can raise Jesus, can't he also raise the dead in us?

*Easter is about hope.* God is not "up there" in the clouds. He is "in here", in our hearts, in our soul, inviting us forward. Hope implies a future reality different from our present, doesn't it? As that other famous theologian Scarlett O'Hara said so well, "tomorrow is another day!" God forgives us not because he is a nice guy, but because he wants to pull us out of our mud and have us help him change the world. God can't work with people who are moping around saying "woe is me!", or frozen solid from anxiety. He wants us to work with him, to cooperate, to listen and act, and spread the word. There's something ahead to look forward to, a Kingdom we don't completely understand today, but if the Resurrection of Jesus is just the down payment, imagine that Kingdom where all our anxieties are gone. That's something to hope for. That's what Easter means.

*Easter is about hope.*