

Easter Sunday of the Resurrection

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Acts 10:34a, 37–43 / Colossians 3:1–4 / John 20:1–9

BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN CHRIST, a warm welcome to all who join the Dominican friars on this Easter Sunday morning as we rejoice in the Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead.

The eyes of all this morning are fixed on the face of risen Christ: those of Mary Magdalen, those of the disciples, ours, and those of the whole Church. What about his Holy Mother's? The fifth-century Latin poet Sedulius, in his *Paschale carmen*, imagines that it was to the Blessed Virgin Mary that the Risen Christ first appeared: "Before her eyes the Lord first stood / And presented himself openly in the light, so that his good mother, / Spreading abroad the news of his great miracles, the one who was / The way by which he once came to us, might also signal his return" (5.361–64). Pope St. John Paul II thought there might be something to this: "The Blessed Virgin too was probably a privileged witness of Christ's Resurrection, completing in this way her participation in all the essential moments of the paschal mystery."¹ We do not have to take a position on this disputed question to imagine an early appearance of Christ to his Holy Mother, to hear the news of his Resurrection from her lips, and to contemplate his face through her eyes.

From the very first moment of Christ's conception, the "eyes of her heart were already turned to him" and thereafter her "gaze, ever filled with adoration and wonder, would never leave him."² "No one

¹ General Audience, May 21, 1997.

² Pope St. John Paul II, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, §10.

has ever devoted himself to the contemplation of the face of Christ as faithfully as Mary.” Why? Because: “in a unique way the face of the Son belongs to Mary. It was in her womb that Christ was formed, receiving from her a human resemblance which points to an even greater spiritual closeness”.³

The *Regina coeli* invokes precisely Mary’s divine maternity to *identify* the Risen One: *Quia quem meruisti portare, Alleluia / Resurrexit sicut dixit, Alleluia*. Who has risen from the dead? The one whom she merited to bear. The “gaze of sorrow” of the *Stabat Mater* is now “transformed into a *gaze radiant with the joy of the Resurrection*”⁴ because it is from the face of the one formed in her womb that the glory of the Resurrection now blazes forth.

At Christmas we sang: “O that birth forever blessed, / When the Virgin full of grace, / By the Holy Ghost conceiving, / Bore the Savior of our race; / And the Babe, the world’s Redeemer, / First revealed his sacred face, / Evermore and evermore” (Prudentius, *Of the Father’s Love Begotten*). On the morning of the Resurrection, gazing at the face of her Risen Son, Mary can still see the sacred face of her infant son as he lay in her arms on the night of his birth. So can we, as she draws us into the depths of these mysteries. A pious Jewish maiden, Mary would have been familiar with the whole array of prophecy and tradition that foretold the identity and mission of the child who was to become the Savior of the world. She knew that “He comes to make his blessings flow / Far as the curse is found.”⁵ She would have known the texts we heard at the Easter Vigil that recall the whole complex web of prefiguration and typology that render the Paschal mystery intelligible to the eyes of faith. Christ endured every kind of suffering in those who prefigured him: “In Abel he was slain, in Isaac bound, in Jacob exiled, in Joseph sold, in Moses exposed to die, . . . sacrificed in the Passover lamb, persecuted in David, dishonored in the prophets.”⁶ Discerning all this from the beginning, with the passing years, Mary came to an ever deeper knowledge of the saving mission that would climax in the Crucifixion, Death, and Resurrection of her Son.

Surely she must have felt some premonition of the future ordeal of the Passion in the very chill and hardship of the circumstances

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Isaac Watts, *Joy to the World*.

⁶ Melito of Sardis, *Easter Homily*.

surrounding his birth, when “Earth stood hard as iron, / Water like a stone.”⁷ The tradition of Christmas song demonstrates an uncanny intuition of Mary’s prophetic sense of what the future would hold for her Son.

After his death, Jesus lay in Mary’s arms again when she received his body as he was taken down from the Cross. Perhaps she participated in the preparation of his body for burial. As the Gospel of St. John records, Joseph of Arimathea was assisted by Nicodemus, who brought aloes and myrrh, according to Jewish custom, to be folded into the white linen burial cloth. Not swaddling clothes this time, but a burial cloth instead. Perhaps at that moment Mary recalled the visit of the Wise Men from the East, the prefigured meaning of whose precious aromatic gifts could now be recognized. “Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume / Breathes a life of gathering gloom; / Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying, / Sealed in the stone cold tomb.”⁸

In Mary’s gaze, the face of the infant Christ blends with the face of the suffering Christ and the face of the Risen Christ. Sharing this morning in Mary’s contemplative gaze and devoutly imagining her Easter witness, we learn to celebrate the mysteries of Christ in the present tense, for their deepest meanings coexist with and interpenetrate one another. It is no surprise, then, that the feast of the Nativity should come to mind in the midst of our celebration of the Paschal mystery.

For, to hear the message of the Resurrection from Mary’s lips, as it were, is to contemplate the full sweep of the *Passio Christi*—from Bethlehem to Golgotha, and beyond to the right hand of the Father—to learn the meaning of these mysteries for the Church and for ourselves under her tutelage, and not only to learn about them but also to receive through her intercession the powerful grace they impart. Expert in the mysteries of Christ, Mary never fails to turn our eyes to what is most important for us to see and grasp there and “to be open to the grace which Christ won for us by the mysteries of his life, death and resurrection.”⁹

The Resurrection of Christ is, in a real sense, the fulfillment of the Annunciation, when Mary’s *fiat* opened the way to our redemption, and her own. The body of our risen Lord—the same body he offered in sacrifice on the Cross—was the body he received from Mary in

⁷ Rossetti and Holtz, *In the Bleak Mid-winter*.

⁸ John Henry Hopkins, *We Three Kings of Orient Are*.

⁹ *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, §13.

the womb. What is more, Easter has made her what we hope to be as well. “Welcoming the risen Jesus, Mary is . . . a sign and anticipation of humanity which hopes to achieve its fulfilment through the resurrection of the dead.”¹⁰ Our Lady is the first one to share in the Resurrection of her Son, the first fruits, as it were, of Easter: assumed into heaven and now reigning as Queen of Heaven, she anticipates the Resurrection of our bodies and the life of bliss to come. How easy it is to imagine with Sedulius that she who was “the way by which he once came to us, might also signal his return.”

At Easter, we call on Mary to rejoice—*Regina coeli, laetare*—thus “prolonging in time the ‘rejoice’ that the Angel addressed to her at the Annunciation.”¹¹ While the (probably Franciscan) author of this wonderful antiphon is unknown, there is a beautiful legend that Pope St. Gregory the Great—as he followed barefoot in procession with St. Luke’s icon of Mary—heard angels singing the first lines and added what would become the antiphon’s concluding line: *Ora pro nobis Deum, Alleluia*.

Queen of heaven, rejoice, and pray for us to God. May God grant that, through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, we who this Easter morning have heard the news of the Resurrection from her lips and “who in this season have received the grace to imitate [her] devoutly in contemplating the Passion of Christ . . . cling more firmly each day to your Only Begotten Son and come at last to the fullness of his grace. Amen.”¹² N.V

¹⁰ Pope St. John Paul II, General Audience, May 21, 1997.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Cf. alternate collect for Friday of the Fifth Week of Lent.