

**April 1, 2018 (Easter Sunday) The Empty Tomb Homily:** On the West side of New York City, in Upper Manhattan, there is a site that has traditionally drawn thousands of tourists over the course of many, many years. It is the resting place of one of our nation's former presidents and Military heroes, Ulysses S. Grant. The bodies of Grant and his wife are entombed at the site. There, people of every walk of life pay their respects to the legendary, charismatic leader of the free world. Grant's tomb is one of the landmarks of New York City.

In biblical times, there was a popular interest in the tombs of holy persons such as kings, prophets and martyrs. Jews would often go on pilgrimage to the holy sites and immerse themselves in the sacred history of their people.

The earliest Jewish Christians were interested in the place where Jesus died and was buried. It was customary for tourists in the Holy Land to visit the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, where, according to scholars, our Lord was laid in the tomb. You may recall the fourteenth and last station of the cross, a one-time popular devotion: "Jesus is laid in the tomb" A visitor would likely see an inscription engraved in Latin, over Christ's tomb which reads, "Non est hic", meaning, "He is not here". Why not? He has been raised!

An early Roman emperor, Hadrian, a fierce antagonist of the Christian Church, found the pilgrimages of Christians to the tomb of Christ to be deeply troubling. As a retaliatory measure, he ordered that the tomb be covered over and an altar dedicated to the goddess Venus, be erected over it.

Following the crucifixion of Our Lord, a prominent Jew, Joseph of Arimathea, took responsibility... at great personal cost to himself, to have Jesus buried. His action was nothing less than scandalous to the Temple officials and other leaders. We read in John's gospel: "At the place where he had been crucified, there was a garden, and in this garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been buried. Since it was the Jewish day of preparation and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there". (Jn.19:41-42)

The tomb signifies the finality of death. The deceased are now cut off from the land of the living. The stone that covered the corpse separated them from friends and family. In Jewish thought, they were said to have a shadowy existence in the Sheol, a place akin to the twilight zone. The Old Testament, itself, as is well known, did not testify to faith in a joyous afterlife. How could life be comfortable in the dark, the confinement, the loneliness of the grave? As for the biblical narratives of Easter, the women who visit Christ's tomb early in the morning have no inkling that their beloved Jesus had risen from the dead. As far as they were concerned, the book of Jesus' life has been closed, the story ended. Jesus is dead, period. Recall the words of Mary Magdalene, "They have taken Jesus away from the tomb and we do not know where they put him". (Jn.20:2).

The word "Easter" means "a passing over" from death to life. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is an act of God. God gave life back to Jesus. The empty tomb symbolizes the triumph of God who has freed Christ his Son from the cold, dark grave. His divine power reversed the situation of injustice suffered by Jesus on the day of his death. As we read in the Acts of the Apostles, "This man God raised up on the third day and granted that he be visible by the witnesses chosen beforehand by God".

What lessons can we derive from today's great feast?

First, death does have the final word. Jesus did not remain in the tomb. Life is stronger than death. Jesus lives, and dies no more. He is not a character in the remote past but an abiding, living presence today. Eternal life awaits each one of us. The tomb is no longer a frightening place because it is empty. The open tomb symbolizes the new and everlasting life into which Jesus had risen. His body was not only alive but in a new form of life... a glorified body;

Second, there is the mystery of the soul's resurrection, "You have raised my soul from the grave", declares the psalmist. In her excellent book, "The Risen Life" the English mystic, Caryl Houselander writes, "In every life there are many secret resurrections. In our sins, we are the tombs in which Christ lies dead but the first moment of sorrow for sin, He rises from the dead IN US. The life of the world is renewed by our sorrow, the soul that was in darkness radiates the morning light"; and

Third, our lives are full of people that are dead and buried. Too many of us have lost one or both parents. A not insignificant number of us have fond recollections of our deceased grandparents, who have passed away. All of us have dead friends to remember and mourn. So many faces have disappeared from our lives. In our good fortune, we can see the very places where we buried our dead. As Fr. Gerald O' Collins, S.J. points out, "What we draw from the Resurrection of Jesus is the sure hope that none of those faces are gone forever. The Christians trusts that none of those voices will be lost forever. In Christ, the dead and buried will rise again."

Amen!