

# EASTER VIGIL – YEAR C DO NOT LOOK FOR THE LIVING AMONG THE DEAD

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#### Introduction

We Christians are convinced we are custodians of an excellent project of humanity and society. We are proud if the noble and elevated moral proposal that we preach is recognized. We are pleased to be referred to as the messengers of universal fellowship, justice, and peace. We experience a certain modesty presenting ourselves as witnesses to the resurrection, as carriers of the light that illuminates the tomb.



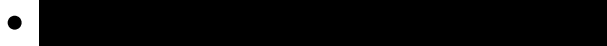
Sometimes we get the impression that, on the same night of the Passover, preachers feel a little embarrassed to show the joy of Christ's victory over death during their homilies. Instead, speaking about the Risen One, they often fall back on current topics that captivate the assembly's attention more easily. They touch on serious and important social issues that need to be illuminated by the light of the Gospel. However, at the Easter Vigil, the community is convened to hear another announcement. It is gathered to celebrate and sing praise to the Lord of life for the unheard prodigy he has created

to raise his servant Jesus.

Tertullian, a Christian rhetorician of the first centuries, characterized the faith and life of the communities of his time thus: ‘The Christian hope is the resurrection of the dead; all that we are, we are to the extent we believe in the resurrection.’

What distinguishes the Christian from other people is not a heroic moral life. Noble gestures of love are also made by non-believers who, without realizing it, are moved by the Spirit of Christ. The world expects from Christians a moral life consistent with the Gospel. However, it first seeks to answer the riddle of death and the testimony that Christ has risen and has transformed life on this earth from gestation and death to a new birth.

The urgency of a new life can be understood only by those who are no longer afraid of death because, with the eyes of faith, ‘he saw’ the Risen One and cultivates in the heart the expectation that soon the day dawns and the morning star rises (2 P 1:19).



*“The light of the Risen One illuminates every moment of our life.”*

### First Reading: Romans 6:3-11

Brothers and sisters: Are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life.

For if we have grown into union with him through a death like his, we shall also be united with him in the resurrection. We know that our old self was crucified with him, so that our sinful body might be done away with, that we might no longer be in slavery to sin. For a dead person has been absolved from sin. If, then, we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. We know that Christ, raised from the dead, dies no more; death no longer has power over him. As to his death, he died to sin once and for all; as to his life, he lives for God. Consequently, you too must think of yourselves as being dead to sin and living for God in Christ Jesus. —The Word of the Lord.

From the earliest years of the Church’s life, Christians declared holy ‘the day after the Sabbath’ and assigned it a new name. What the Romans called the ‘day of the sun’ became the

'Lord's Day' in Latin: *Dominica dies*. Soon they came to feel the need to dedicate a special day to celebrate the resurrection of Christ, a founding event of their faith. Thus, what the Passover considered 'the Sunday of Sundays,' 'the feast of feasts,' the queen of all festivals, of all Sundays, of all the days of the year, was born.

During the solemn vigil—at which nobody could be absent—baptisms were administered. The ritual required that the catechumens not only receive a simple ablution but be totally immersed in water and then emerge from the baptismal font, like the maternal womb, as new creatures, the children of the light. Amidst songs of joy, the community welcomed these new children, reborn into divine life from the water and the Spirit. This is the rite Paul refers to in the reading from the Letter to the Romans. To the Christians in Rome, he recalls the moment of their baptism and the catechesis they received.

He exhorts them with a rhetorical question: "*Don't you know that in baptism which unites us to Christ we are all baptized and plunged into his death?*" (v. 3), an effective way to remind them of a truth that they already had in mind. They were baptized into Christ, resulting in an intimate union with him, sharing his destiny of death, to rise with him to life.

One day, Jesus, too, used the image of baptism: "*But I have a baptism to undergo, and what anguish I feel until it is over*" (Lk 12:50). He was referring to his 'immersion' in the waters of death, from which he would then resurface on Easter Day. The Christian, as Paul explains, is called to follow the same path as the Master. To be united with the Risen One's fullness of life, he must first die to the 'old man' in all his evil ways. This happens in the ritual immersion in the baptismal font. Going down into this tank means to agree to die to sin, to 'bury' his past and start a whole new life, a life in harmony with that of Christ (vv. 4-6).

In the Letter to the Galatians, Paul explains this passage from death to life with a dramatic contrast between the 'works of the flesh' and 'the fruit of the Spirit': "*You know what comes from the flesh: fornication, impurity and shamelessness, idol worship and sorcery, hatred, jealousy and violence, anger, ambition, division, factions, and envy, drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I again say to you what I have already said: those who do these things shall not inherit the Kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is charity, joy and peace, patience, understanding of others, kindness and fidelity, gentleness and self-control*" (Gal 5:19-23).

The night of Easter is for each Christian—child, adolescent, or young adult—the best time to be reminded of the commitments made by those who want to behave in a manner consistent with his own baptism.

The first part of the passage focused on the negative aspect and on death to sin. In the second part (vv. 8-11), Paul introduces a positive theme, the entrance into life: "*If we died with Christ, we believe we will also live with him.*" We pass through death, but the ultimate destiny is life. The first-generation Christians have deeply internalized this Pauline teaching on baptism. They tried to put it into practice in their lives and gradually enriched the ritual with other symbolic

and eloquent gestures.

They introduced the gesture of covering the neophytes with a white robe, a sign of the completely new and spotless life they commit themselves to living. The bishop gives them the vestment after embracing them as they come up from the baptismal font. In some communities, the bishop also puts on their lips a few drops of milk and honey, the food promised by God to those who enter the Promised Land, the land that—for the neophytes—is the Kingdom of God.

The shape of these tanks was also acquiring symbolic meanings. The oldest—two famous ones preserved in Nazareth—were square or rectangular to remind the candidate of the tomb in which they enter with Christ to bury ‘the old man’ and all his evil ways and then rise with Christ to new life. Other tanks were circular to reproduce the vault of heaven. They indicate to the neophytes the celestial kingdom into which they enter. Those of cruciform shape recall the baptism's gift of life; they were invited to join the Master and offer themselves to the brothers and sisters. Those of oval design finally had an even more apparent symbolism: as life comes out of an egg, so from the baptismal font, the new person is born.

### Gospel: Luke 24:1-12

At daybreak on the first day of the week the women who had come from Galilee with Jesus took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb; but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were puzzling over this, behold, two men in dazzling garments appeared to them. They were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground. They said to them, “Why do you seek the living one among the dead? He is not here, but he has been raised. Remember what he said to you while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners and be crucified, and rise on the third day.” And they remembered his words. Then they returned from the tomb and announced all these things to the eleven and to all the others. The women were Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James; the others who accompanied them also told this to the apostles, but their story seemed like nonsense and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb, bent down, and saw the burial cloths alone; then he went home amazed at what had happened. —The Gospel of the Lord.

On Good Friday, some women who had accompanied Jesus from Galilee were on Calvary and, from afar, they had witnessed the drama that was accomplished there (Luke 23:49). They went back to the town and prepared spices and ointments. On the Sabbath day, they rested, as the law prescribed (Luke 23:55-56), but on the first day of the week, they went to the tomb at dawn.

It was customary that, after the burial, the women would return to visit the grave. It was

believed that, for four days, the vital breath of the deceased continued to hover around the body and could return to reanimate it. It happened at the time of the prophets Elijah and Elisha, and Jesus too had done resuscitations: he had brought back to life the son of the widow of Nain, the daughter of Jairus, and Lazarus. But to revive is not to defeat death. All those who some men of God have revived then died again and forever. Death, relentlessly, always came back to recover for itself the prey that had been temporarily withdrawn.

To resurrect is not to come back to the previous life—as in resuscitation—but to enter into a completely new form of life, a life over which death has no more power. What did the women expect by going to the tomb on early Easter morning? A resuscitation? To find some signs of life in the body that Joseph of Arimathea had sadly deposited in his own grave? No! Resuscitation of the broken body of Jesus was absolutely unthinkable.

A resurrection, then? It is true! Jesus had spoken of it, but no one had ever understood what he meant. The idea that the deceased would pass immediately from this to another form of life was utterly alien to the Jewish culture of that time. In the last two centuries before Christ, in Israel, they had begun to speak of an “*awakening of those who sleep in the Region of the dust*” (Dn 12:2). But this awakening was projected to a far-off point. It was believed that it would only be realized at the end of the world.

The wisest among the rabbis gave the assurance that the righteous, the martyrs who had sacrificed themselves for their faith, would have their life that had been brutally taken away given back. When on earth the long-awaited kingdom of peace and universal justice would have begun, the Lord would have brought them back to life and would have made them participate in the joy of a wholly renovated world. The fate of the wicked, however, was eternal death. Their end would be like animals and plants: no one would have preserved even their memory.

Only the Pharisees believed in this ‘awakening from the Region of the dust.’ The Sadducees—the priestly caste that officiated in the temple in Jerusalem—did not believe in any form of life after death. The simple people, the mass of the people, had concrete problems of survival in this world and did not have much time to quibble about another world. This being the widespread mentality, nobody, on that first day after the Sabbath, could expect a resuscitation of the body of Jesus. The only consoling thought that someone probably cultivated was the vague hope of returning to life in the end times.

When women reached the tomb, here’s the surprise: the stone was rolled away. They entered and were amazed not to find the body of Jesus. They do not understand. They can still not correctly interpret the sign that God wished to place before their shocked and incredulous eyes. They would have to reflect, remember, and understand the words of resurrection that they had repeatedly heard from the Master.

Their first thought was somewhat different: thieves had entered the tomb. Despite the death penalty imposed by the Roman law on those who violated the graves, removing objects and

furnishings in tombs was common practice. “*They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have laid him*” —Mary Magdalene tells Peter and the other disciple (Jn 20:2). A timid thought—has the vital spirit revived the body of Jesus? —has probably crossed the mind of the women, but it was immediately taken as absurd. Then they remained ‘uncertain,’ or instead—as the evangelist’s text literally says—found themselves in a ‘no way out’ situation (v. 4).

At that point, only a light from heaven could introduce them to the absolute novelty which they not only had never thought of but which they were not even able to conceive. “*Two men in dazzling garments suddenly appeared*” (v. 4). Later they will be identified as angels (Luke 24:23). Mark speaks of ‘a young man,’ Matthew of ‘an angel of the Lord descended from heaven,’ John of ‘two angels.’

The literary language employed by each of the evangelists is different, but the message is the same. The sky sends its light to illuminate the mystery of death, to give a response to the greatest of the enigmas that always anguish man. The women’s reaction to the splendor of God’s light is a religious fear. They bowed their faces to the ground, taking the attitude of those who accept the revelation of heaven respectfully and devotedly. “*Why do you look for the living among the dead? —they are asked you won’t find him here. He is risen*” (vv. 5-6).

Resuscitation is an experience that can be noted, the resurrection—that is, the final entry into the form of immortal life proper of God—is not verifiable by the senses. It is not a discovery of the human mind or the result of reasoning and logical deduction; it can be revealed only by God. The tomb is empty, not because the victim has temporarily escaped death, but because God has transformed it into a womb that gives birth to a new life. God was the midwife present at the birth. The women no longer must look for Jesus in the realm of the dead. He is the Living One, and with his death, he emptied every tomb.

From Easter Day onward, it is foolish to think of meeting in the cemetery those who have left this world. To be found, there are only the remains, atoms, molecules that do not enter heaven. The loved one we seek is living with Christ, with God.

The women—like us today—wanted to see the One who can be seen only with the eyes of faith. The heavenly messengers indicate to them—and to us—the way to meet him “*Remember what he told you in Galilee*” (v. 6). Remember his Word, seek him in his Word! It is through this Word that you will meet and ‘see’ him. “*And they remembered*” (v. 8). This is the time when their heart is opened to faith in the Risen One. The memory of the Lord’s words sheds light on the events, otherwise absurd, that happened to Jesus. It gives a positive meaning also to all the dead of today.

In Luke’s Gospel, women have a special place. They are placed next to the Twelve, following Jesus going through towns and villages preaching and proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of God (Lk 8:1-3). On Easter day, they reach the highest point of their mission. They

are the first to be involved in the revelation of the sky; they are the first to remember the Word and proclaim the Resurrection.

In Jewish culture, women's testimony had no value. God disrupts not only the expectations of people but also their criteria for judgment: He chooses—as Paul say—“*what the world considers foolish to shame the wise ... what the world considers weak to shame the strong ... God has chosen common and unimportant people, making use of what is nothing to nullify the things that are what in the world is low and despised, what counts for nothing*” to carry out his designs (1 Cor 1:27-28).

The apostles' reaction to the women's news is most natural: “*Those who heard did not believe the seemingly nonsensical story*” (v. 11). Throughout the New Testament, the term ‘delusions’ occurs only here and gives the idea of how the resurrection was an absurd thought that has not even touched the mind of an Israelite. When speaking in his own defense before the prosecutor, Paul mentions the resurrection of Jesus. Festus stops him saying: “*Paul, you are mad; your great learning has deranged your mind*” (Acts 26:24).

Peter does not believe but leaves and begins the journey the women took: he goes first to the tomb, and there he sees the linen cloths and encounters the signs of death. They are the only reality that human eyes can verify. His reaction, however, is no longer disbelief but wonder. It is the first step that he takes towards the faith. He will only make the decisive step when the Risen One will ‘remind’ him of the words he had said (Lk 24:44) and open the mind to understand the Scriptures (Lk 24:45-47).

More than the other evangelists, Luke points out the difficulty of the apostles in accepting the revelation of the sky, their unbelief, and their wonder. Their story is ours; the journey of faith they traveled is ours.

**READ:** The drama continues. Matthew likes drama: the earthquake, an angel in dazzling white, the faithful women performing their duty with fear and joy. The tomb is empty.

**REFLECT:** Do you like the way Matthew describes the empty tomb? Does anyone witness the actual resurrection? Belief in the risen Christ requires an act of faith that women and men give witness as disciples. What lesson does this teach us?

**PRAY:** Easter is Alleluia, ‘God be praised.’ It is not said during Lent. At Easter, we sing it with great enthusiasm: ‘Jesus is raised! God be praised!’

**ACT:** Easter is a springtime feast. The earth comes alive, and the Lord is raised. Make it a happy time for yourself and others.

Fernando Armellini