

## **The path of resurrection: Easter sermon 2010**

Happy Easter, dear brothers and sisters

I don't know what meaning Easter has for you but for me it is the holiday on which I am most aware of the fact that Christians all over the world are united by one God, one belief and one holiday... even more than on Christmas or Pentecost. I have spent Easter in very different parts of the world and followed Good Friday and Easter services in various languages and always felt very much part of what was happening. I have experienced a foot-washing ritual in a little Italian community, took part in a stations-of-the cross march through the via Dolorosa in Jerusalem, waited for the crack of dawn bringing on the Easter morning at a lake in Austria and took part in a lovely Easter service in a very small Methodist church outside of London where I was absolutely delighted that we sang "To God be the glory" as an opening hymn. It would be great to exchange all the Easter experiences and traditions that we as a colorful congregation have collected throughout the years and I am sure there would be a great variety of songs, actions and memories. But in the core people all over the world take the same path that leads to Easter... It is the path that was laid out for Jesus starting on Maundy Thursday with the betrayal, his loneliness and the disciples getting it so wrong. Together with the women and men who accompanied him on his path from his arrest up to his crucifixion and his burial, we take this path of suffering and pain every year. And doesn't this path seem endless and long... even for us? After all- we know how the story ends, don't we. Every year I am so relieved and happy when Easter morning and the empty tomb come closer and the heaviness of the holy week vanishes. How much greater must the joy and relief have been of those women that we met at the empty tomb in our all-age story today...

The Marys and Joannas of those times really went through mixed emotions. The moment we catch up with them at the tomb, they have come such a long way already. Their Easter experience doesn't begin on Palm Sunday or Maundy Thursday. In Luke 23, the chapter that comes before our reading for today, we are told that they have accompanied Jesus all the way from Galilee. And not only five of them, but many more... we aren't told an exact number. They came to Jerusalem with so many hopes and visions. They followed Jesus wherever he went, wanted to be close to him and experience his power, his love and grace that everybody was talking about. They were there when he made his miracles happen, listened to his words and lessons on the way and shouted "Hosiannah" with the crowd when he entered Jerusalem. Some of them must have thought that the following days would be the summit of their

time together. They surely didn't expect to be witnesses of his betrayal, his crucifixion and his death.

And as much as they were part of Jesus' life while he was still alive, they are part of the resurrection experience and of spreading the news. The women who walked to Jesus' tomb on Easter morning have to take many steps through different stages of acknowledgment and believing on the path towards Jesus' resurrection. And we are invited to follow them

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Let us walk this path of resurrection with the five women we met in the all-age story for today one more time.

First of all there is Mary who has come to the tomb to anoint Jesus. She is in a state of shock, not even being able to cry. She doesn't know what to do with her pain and with her sadness. She does what we all do when a loved one has passed away: She cares for the dead body, occupies herself with the actions that she can deal with: preparing ointments and spices is easier than acknowledging that Jesus is dead.

While we watch her on her last steps towards the tomb, let us think about our own lives. About the actions that we need to do in order to keep on going. About the paths that have been difficult in our lives and on which we walk with our heads turned to the ground, unaware of the things that are happening around us or waiting for us at the end of the road.

Mary is not yet ready for the resurrection experience. We need to let her walk through this stage of shock, disbelief and pain before she can enter the next part of the path.

Joanna, the second woman on the path, is some steps ahead of Mary. She has been through the business of preparing the spices for the ointment. She knows the shock that Mary is dealing with. But she is already looking ahead. She is thinking of the future, wondering how to live on without the man she has followed so faithfully. Yet, she is full of fear and without a sense of orientation. She is lost, yet determined to follow the path that Jesus has laid out for her. Step by step.

How many of us have walked beside her on that path of fear and forlornness. Not really knowing where it will lead us but somehow trusting in the path that God has laid out for us. Joanna's steps head towards the message of Christine's Good Friday sermon in which she asked us all to think about our purpose in our

life and what God sent us to do in this world. Finding out what God needs us to do gives us a sense of orientation even in times of pain and suffering. Joanna knows that her destination is following Jesus on his path, even when it leads to his tomb. She only needs to walk a few more steps until she reaches the tomb and the Easter surprise that it contains.

Phoebe and Junis, the women 3 and 4 in our all-age story have already reached the tomb and realized that it's empty. The two of them are jumping up and down from a feeling of shock and amazement. After everything they have experienced in the past days they expect the next catastrophe when they see that Jesus' body is gone. Of course they think somebody has stolen it or done something horrible with it. At first they are caught in their feelings of mistrust and probably the following sentence spoken by the two men doesn't change their feeling that something really strange is happening here:

*"Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but he has risen,"* they say.

I can just see the skeptical looks on the women's faces...and they suit my doubts and questions that I have often asked myself. But then the men take Phoebe and Junis back to those happy days they experienced with Jesus in Galilee. They take them back to the point at which their common journey began.

*"Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again. "*

Phoebe and Junis' minds must be racing at this point.

"Is that what he really said?"; they might think.

Can it be true?

Why didn't we understand his message back then?

Why weren't we prepared for all that would happen?

Is this the end of our path or the beginning?

Is this a dream?

In the Bible we are not told how long this phase of acknowledgement lasts. But we are told, that eventually they remember Jesus' words and accept the truth that Jesus has risen. The point where the past meets the future and all the pieces of the puzzle that made so little sense on the way slowly fit together is the point on which Jesus' resurrection becomes real for these women.

It's not yet a moment of utter joy, but rather a moment of reflection, of amazement and awe.

Can you recall similar moment in your life? Aren't those moments in which we feel God's presence ever so intensely?

Understanding that Jesus has died for us is not a process that happens within a minute. Understanding resurrection takes time and requires us and the women of that time to reflect about it over and over again. The empty tomb is the key to the Easter experience, a space in which hopes and doubts, fears and relief, sadness and joy are so close together. A space that we are allowed to enter in order to understand Easter. Not on our own but together with the women of that time and together with those who celebrate Easter with us. Phoebe and Junis must have discussed their Easter experience over and over again. And so can we. For some of us the sentence "Jesus is risen" may be a truth that we have long accepted. For others the same sentence may still be a mystery that we are trying to grasp every time we enter that empty tomb. For some of us Easter ends with that empty tomb and with the mystery that it involves. For many of us this tomb is just the beginning. A step that calls us to run into the world and spread the happy news. Before we do that...

Let us stand next to Joanna, Phoebe and Junis for a moment, understanding what the words "Jesus is risen" mean to us today and on which step of the journey between shock, fear, amazement and joy we are standing. (pause) Mary, the fifth woman of our story has been through every one of the stages I mentioned. She is ready to tell the world what she has seen. She is running, skipping, laughing and enjoying life again. She is just waiting to meet the first person she can hug and she can share her joy with.

Full of ease.

Relieved.

Free.

She had to experience that the path towards resurrection leads through suffering and pain. But she has left that part of the journey behind. She has encountered God who was with them in all the suffering and now has given them new life, new hope and new strength. She knows that death doesn't prevail. That life takes over and death is defeated. And Mary can't sit still and enjoy that message. She needs to shout it out to the world and sing:

*"Because he lives I can face tomorrow... because he lives all fear is gone.  
Because I know he holds the future, and life is worth the living  
Just because he lives. "*

If we close our eyes, maybe we can see her skip and dance and thereby get a feeling of what Easter means:

Easter is ultimate joy. Hope. New Life. Bright light that shines for those coming out of the darkness. Easter is believing and doubting at the same time. Easter is dancing and celebrating, reflecting and discussing. And for me Easter is a path. It is the end of the path of suffering. And the beginning of the path of hoping, wondering and changing.

It will take the world a while to believe her and join her in her song. The disciples will have to go through their own Easter experience on their walk to Emmaus. Thomas won't believe her until he actually meets and touches the risen Lord. And many believers will discuss the questions that Phoebe and Junis must have spoken about when they heard the unbelievable news.

I have walked the path of resurrection with the Joannas and Marys of that time so often and always got stuck in the tomb. It was not until I heard a sermon on the walk on Emmaus on an Easter Monday that I realized that Easter does not end with Jesus' resurrection... but it actually begins with it.

I wish for all of us that no matter in which state of mind we have come to this Easter service today... happy- sad- full of fear- doubting- hoping- feeling numb or full of joy... I wish for us that we take the first steps on that new path leading to a hopeful future in Jesus Christ together... and that we may feel the freshness of life that comes from taking the first steps in a new direction.

The Baptism family and little ----- have already walked on that path towards resurrection and I would like to invite you to walk along that path on your way to communion today. Feel the promise of love, of healing and of a new life that Easter brings. And walk these first steps towards Easter together with the women of Jesus' time, with your fellow Christians in this congregation here and with the millions of Christians celebrating Easter all over the world. And let us all together join in the song of Easter: Because he lives I can face tomorrow... Happy Easter. Amen.