

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Easter Day  
April 16, 2017

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When we gather on the Queen of Feasts we hear again the account of the first Easter Sunday morning. Only they didn't call it that. The calendar said it was the start of a new workweek. For St Peter and his colleagues it was something else, the first day after they had just spent the worst three days of their lives. Between their great bouts of grief and remorse they were mostly trying to figure out how to get out of town! People who have spent days stranded in an airport during a blizzard can identify with the apostolic college in the early hours of Easter Day.

But just when they thought things could not get worse, *they did*. Mary Magdalene arrived and said "they have taken away the Lord out of the tomb." It was a report *completely lacking in faith*. Peter and John took Mary's fears and doubts at face value. Why? Spiritually all of the Lord's followers were dead in the water. (All except for the Blessed Mother. There is a lovely belief that the Risen Lord made his first appearance to His Mother. But the Gospel account of Easter puts its focus on events at the now-empty tomb.)

Of course now that it was too late, the disciples would do *anything* for Jesus. In this they are like Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus on Good Friday afternoon. Peter and John were not predisposed to believe in the Resurrection. Yet if the grave had been violated there was nothing for it but that the corpse must be found and laid to rest again. If the apostolic mission reached its intended goal, you and I at this very moment would be engaged in the business of the first day of the workweek!

But that is not what happened, or why we are here. When Peter and John arrived at the tomb we are given a factual account. There was no attempt to sell anything. There wasn't a miracle in sight: no angels, and no body. But something caught their notice: *grave clothes*. These were one ones they supposed had been used to wrap the dead body of Jesus. And this sight puzzled them. With the body gone, why were the grave clothes still here? Then they noticed something else. And for at least one of them, when he thought about it, the sight was a decisive breakthrough. *Metanoia* in Greek. The burial shroud was lying collapsed, and the napkin used to cover the head still retained the shape of a head that was now gone. The words

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used to describe this are simple, artless, realism. Scripture provides us a “take it or leave it attitude.” You and I are invited to draw our own conclusions.

Saint John certainly drew a conclusion. We are told what it was. The very position of these grave clothes was enough to carry conviction to his own mind. “*He saw and believed.*” What a contrast there is between plain evidence and spiritual vision! The intuitive leap forward, inspired by the Holy Ghost, sometimes far out-distances the physical evidence. Resurrections do not happen. To jump from an appreciation of the way the grave clothes looked, deflated or collapsed as they were, to a conviction that Christ is alive, is, to say the least, a reach! But for St John, this leap of faith is what made sense of the plain evidence. John understood what he could not prove, that the Body of the Lord had passed through the cloth wrappings without disturbing them. For St John, no other explanation was possible. Having arrived at that conclusion, suddenly everything else came together: The Cross, the victorious suffering, and the empty tomb, all fell into place as component parts of a spiritually consistent pattern. St John saw the hand of Almighty God in all of it. He knew that, as a consequence, the world was a different place than he thought only a few minutes earlier. A new creation had been revealed by the One Who made it all in the first place.

Peter and John later that day encountered the Risen Christ. And the power of the Resurrection brought courage and joy to *all* the timid and grief-stricken disciples. That power turned these men and women into marvelous confessors, and many into martyrs. And after the Ascension of Our Lord, it has been through the extension of His Life in His Church that this power of the Resurrection has been proclaimed to all mankind throughout the ages.

Down those ages the decisive factor is the inner prompting of the Holy Ghost. One man comes to faith and another is unmoved *by identical evidence*. Just as one man falls in love and another does not, in nearly identical circumstances. Sometimes, for you, the external evidence is compelling, and the Holy Ghost did the connecting. But it might have looked silly to everyone else. Do not bother about that very much. Never be ashamed to tell your story, and to give account of the

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faith that is in you. St John would understand. For him, it was all in the particular way some empty grave clothes were lying on a stone slab!

“*He saw and believed.*” These words record the victory of faith in the heart of one soul. The victory was Christ’s, communicated to one man. And it still happens that way. Saint Peter and Saint John had not yet seen the Lord risen and glorified. But they had seen enough to know that He still lives. That is the beginning of Easter faith. To which you and I Christians respond “*Alleluia!*”