

## Homily

### Easter Sunday

**Newman College  
University of Melbourne**

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Rector

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John 20: 1-9

Listen at <https://soundcloud.com/frank-brennan-6/easter-homily-2020>

Happy Easter.

In today's gospel Mary of Magdala comes to the tomb of Jesus early in the morning when it is still dark. She is on her own. A brave thing for a woman in those days to be approaching the cemetery on her own when it is still dark. She comes to visit the dead one whom she loved. She sees that the stone has been moved away from the tomb, suspecting that strangers have removed the body.

The moved stone is an ambiguous sign at best. She is upset, disturbed. She runs to Simon Peter and the disciple Jesus loved. So, they then run back to the tomb. The other disciple gets there first, looks in, sees the cloths on the ground but does not go in. The cloths on the ground are not themselves a sure sign of anything.

Mary of Magdala has been given a glimmer of Easter possibility on the first sighting; the other disciple has been given an Easter clue on this second sighting. Then Simon Peter goes right into the tomb. At this third sighting, he sees the Easter sign – the cloth which had been over Jesus' head. This cloth is not with the other cloths but rolled up in a place by itself. So, the body has not been stolen. A thief wouldn't do that. Unlike Lazarus who was raised having to be unbound by others, Jesus has been raised with no human assistance, having placed the cloth to the side.

One small wrapped up face cloth is not much of a sign, but when it is explained, it is all we need. At Easter we look for those little signs of eternal life, those little signs of life beyond suffering and death, those little signs of joy and hope in the midst of protracted suffering and death.

This is the first Easter I am spending since the death of my mother Patricia. She died at 91. Beside my bed, I have a photo of her in her mid-40s. Everyday, I sense her presence, her spirit, and I find myself getting more guidance from her now than I did in her last

years. So, what is this talk of life after death? Everyone would agree that my mother once was. But I think that is now only half her story. I believe she is, and always will be – and that the world is a better place for her being. This belief is surely a psychological prop for me, but it is much more than that. It is a belief in the ultimate reality that we Christians celebrate on Easter Day – the communion of the saints, the continued life of our loved ones.

This is the first and hopefully only Easter we are all to spend isolated and locked down with the threat of the coronavirus. We are all trying to flatten the curve or even to squash it, by maintaining physical distancing which entails the shutting down of much of our economy, work and social life.

It's as if we are in a never-ending Holy Saturday with the body of Jesus lying in the tomb. There is talk about how we might snap out of it after months of economic and social isolation – a sort of economic resurrection. In this long running Holy Saturday, we are waiting for a resurrection, for new life.

In countries like the USA, people are doing it much tougher than we are. An American mother of five, Laura Kelly Fanucci, who lost twins at birth, woke the other night facing the enormity of it all, nursing her 5-week-old baby. She penned this poem and put it on Instagram where it went viral:

When this is over, may we never again take for granted  
A handshake with a stranger  
Full shelves at the store  
Conversations with neighbours  
A crowded theatre  
Friday night out  
The taste of communion  
A routine check-up  
The school rush each morning  
Coffee with a friend  
The stadium roaring  
Each deep breath  
A boring Tuesday  
Life itself.

When this ends,  
may we find  
that we have become  
more like the people  
we wanted to be  
we were called to be  
we hoped to be  
and may we stay  
that way - better  
for each other  
because of the worst.

Even in this time of the coronavirus, we too are surrounded by Easter signs like a wrapped face cloth. These signs aren't much, but they are all we need to experience Easter joy.

This Easter, we need to identify what gives us joy and hope other than worldly recognition, achievement and benefits – most of which are on hold and may well be lost. When we are all up against it, unable to control our situation or our world, our sources of joy and hope are nature, our humanity and our God.

Despite sufferings and shortcomings, we delight that nature takes its course. Each of us is but a step in nature's course.

Five years ago, the US theologian Elizabeth A Johnson published a book *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*. It is an exploration of the connections between the scientific insights of Charles Darwin and the Christian ideal of the presence of God in the natural world.

She puts it very simply: 'Keeping in mind the image of Earth from space: the universe is very old. In billions of years, the key numbers are 14, 5 and 4.' 14 billion years ago there was the Big bang; 5 billion years ago, our solar system came to be; and 4 billion years ago, life appeared. Johnson tells us, 'No longer then can theology contrast nature's static regularity with human history, or oppose the fixed pagan gods of nature with the mobile God of the Israelites on the move in history. Nature itself is historical.'

Our joy and our hope is that we are part of nature which is taking its course over billions of years. We are part, an infinitesimal part, of nature taking its course, and yes at times there will be huge tragedies like the coronavirus wreaking devastation on humanity – tragedies which are but a blip in the course of nature over billions of years. Our joy and hope is that nature has a way of setting itself right, even when it causes wholesale devastation here and now.

The human spirit will seek solutions and the good. Here we are confronting a new life-threatening virus and we know that all the world's scientists with the relevant skills are working single-mindedly and co-operatively to find a vaccine, and our politicians are co-operating as they have not for a long time seeking the best way to protect the lives and economic security of all citizens.

In times of crisis some individuals will act primarily in their own self-interest; others will put themselves out for others, including the poor and vulnerable. We think of those heroic doctors and health workers who until recently had no cause to think that they would ever be called upon for truly heroic service, and with little or no preparation, they are stepping up to the plate. They are our joy and hope.

Even when nature is against us and even when the human spirit lets us down, God is with us, promising us life – life even beyond suffering and death.

When contemplating nature, the human spirit and God, even in the midst of adversity and catastrophe, let's call to mind the Spanish expression of which Pope Francis is so fond: 'God always forgives, we forgive sometimes, but nature never forgives.'

With the coronavirus, we are facing unforgiving nature. Housebound, locked down and isolated, we will all need to forgive and be forgiven by each other for those actions that do more than just get on each other's nerves.

This Easter Day with the stone rolled away, the cloths on the ground, and the face cloth neatly wrapped to the side, we rejoice that the Lord is Risen.

Our all forgiving God is with us in our suffering and beyond death.

Yesterday, I received a note from a six year old grandniece: 'Hi Frank. When the Covid-19 ends would we be able to come to breakfast at Wide Open Road. After that we will go swimming, would you like to come?'

Happy Easter.