

From across the Atlantic

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“Resurrection’s Invitation to Being Reconciled to Life”

Father Darren Maslen, S.S.S., D.Min.

One of the paradoxes of living in this highly visual age is how we have become blind to the world of the unseen. It has always been and will be the case that what remains invisible to the eye will have the most profound effect upon the simple matter of existence. The unseen has always had a command upon human destiny. Upon that principle Catholic faith is built, and from the Upper Room where the disciples had re-gathered after Jesus’ resurrection, we are blessed in our belief: *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe* (John 20: 29b).

The recent appearance of the effects of the coronavirus has ironically brought the power of the invisible into view. As a recent editorial in the *National Catholic Reporter* described:

March 2020 may eventually go down as the month that turned our world on its head, or slowed it to a crawl, or at least made us, more than usual, think about the precariousness of the ordinary and the power of the unseen.

People’s resolve is shaken at times like this quite simply because the foundation for getting on with life lacks a basic aspect: understanding. When it comes to Covid-19, the usual questions that generate discussion online or the telephone gravitate around, where from, why now, where now, who now, what next, etc? At the same time, it seems to me there is a waking up from a kind of slumber from a naivety about how we live. Time and again, conversations I’m having reveal how living in a radically different kind of a way through self-isolating within our households is showing how modern living has been constructed to the detriment of those key factors that say, “This is what it means to be human.” Our celebration of the resurrection of the Lord can have a lot to say and much to inspire in our present circumstance, not least because its triumph largely remains unrecognized from our sight, and whose reach is beyond our understanding.

Understanding something is the hallmark of human achievement. That is what we have inherited from a plethora of worldly perspectives spanning generations. This is the reason the great corridors of learning in medieval Europe latched onto Saint Anselm of Canterbury’s definition of theology as being so attractive: *Faith seeking understanding*. The problem is we are often so preoccupied in grappling with what we can understand that we scarcely give any attention to the thing that gets us there - the *seeking*.

My former Religious Institute was the Anglican monastic order of the Community of the Resurrection, Mirfield, based in the north of England. As a seminarian, I would notice an elderly member being wheeled into the chapel for Evening Prayer. Underneath the aged appearance of this religious was a story of a Cambridge academic who had refocused his energies from understanding to seeking. Harry Williams, CR, wrote a number of books, among them *True Resurrection* and *True Wilderness*, both of which led the reader in the direction of becoming seekers of God, not merely trying to understand God. In the latter he stated: "Christian truth, in other words, must be in the blood as well as in the brain. If it is only in the brain, it is without life and powerless to save. I decided, therefore, that alongside teaching academic theology I would try to ask myself how far and in what way a doctrine of the creed or a saying of Christ had become part of what I am."

Williams gave special treatment to the resurrection, precisely because he had observed the tendency of Christians to make it into some kind of powerless idol. By removing it from everyday experience and locating it either in Jerusalem or Galilee, or into the realm after our physical death, resurrection is past or future but never present, and subsequently doesn't have anything to say to our religious, institutional or personal ways of life. Growing out of his own reflection, Williams wrote in *True Resurrection*: "Resurrection occurs to us as we are, and its coming is generally quiet and unobtrusive, and we may hardly be aware of its creative power. It is only later that we realize that, in some way or another, we have been raised to newness of life, and so have heard the voice of the Eternal Word." As a theologian, Harry Williams grew into a certainty that theology was not just an academic study but rather a process of self-discovery. It is not about understanding things from Christian faith but allowing that faith to seek.

Around Easter every year, I usually give some thought to Harry's beliefs about resurrection, and generally I agree with his hunch about it not speaking to the present. However, I always want to reverse his conclusion about what theology is. It is not self-discovery, but *discovery of the self*. In other words, by putting the discovering before our sense of self, who we are becomes wide open to every circumstance, people, and location in which we are living with God.

Every encounter with the risen Lord in the New Testament ushers in the same process. As far as scripture is concerned, resurrection was a public event, - group experiences - and where Jesus appears to individuals the conclusion always brings about the regathering of the Christian fellowship. As we heard from Matthew's gospel this year, Mary Magdalene's first encounter with Christ was on Easter morning while she was in the company of the other Mary. This was no private audience, but a summons to regroup the community in Galilee (Matthew 28:10). While it is significant that the risen Jesus was not seen by anyone outside of the relatively small Christian community (notable exception being Saul of Tarsus, of course), that does not mean the resurrection was a private religious experience, but a series of public observable events with Jesus' followers. Discovering that Jesus was raised from the dead is the breath of life that will always warrant discovery.

Regathering in fellowship is the most natural response to resurrection's touch upon us. I have seen it clearly and close at hand in the past days. The *Life in the Eucharist* team in Scotland, for example, met every evening during Holy Week using a WhatsApp group medium to enter the spirit of the video presentations and written reflections offered on the CEE webpage. A *virtual cenacle* has been born across the Atlantic where our lay Eucharistic evangelization team comes together *to seek*.

Similarly, what I am experiencing as I accompany people during these days on the telephone and online, is a very broad and quite genuine *reconciliation with life*. The signs of this are manifested in different ways, but they all point to the fact that when daily life looks so different, what is being reflected back to so many people is a deep reconnection to what being human is all about:

- The self-offering of those working in healthcare or public services, who make themselves vulnerable for the sake of the most vulnerable evokes the deepest appreciation.
- When the gift of life appears to be so universally fragile, we suddenly know that we belong to existence, and that existence does not belong to us, like a possession.
- The relationships upon which we have constructed our lives are fundamentally the mould that has shaped us. Being separated from extended family and friends over a long period of time reveals how we belong to these relationships, and that the pride of my individualism is a dangerous illusion.
- We can become the masters of time by allowing it to belong to us, and not letting time push us forward so that we blindly miss out on simple graces given us. With more of us spending time at home, comments such as, "I cannot remember the last time I played a board game with my family" or, "We all sat around together and the children loved it!"

Resurrection and reconciliation go well together. Being reconciled to aspects of our life this Easter coincides with this unprecedented period in our modern history, where the effects of Covid-19 will linger long after the virus' threat to life. Saint Peter Julian Eymard understood the Upper Room as Jesus' home on earth, not least because the reciprocity of love between the disciples and himself was most evident there. Where Jesus had taught love in that Cenacle, he would return to the same room to bestow it, most powerfully through being the agent of reconciliation. The same pattern was reestablished after Christ had risen from the dead, - he picked up where he left off - and it was all about food. As Robert Schreier C.P.P.S. observes:

Eating together had been a principal hallmark of Jesus' ministry. He frequently referred to eating together as a sign of the peace of God's reign, where all would sit down together and the poor would have enough to eat. To eat with the disciples not only showed that he had forgiven their lack of faith, but that the reign he had promised was now coming into being.

On this side of the Atlantic, the President of Ireland has recently said that we should not expect life to be the same after the period of the Coronavirus is over. Somehow, we know that to be a truth about the resurrection of the Lord Jesus too. When that truth is found, the instinct to seek, which animates our Christian faith, can resurrect us to a lasting and more appreciative reconciliation with life, in its fullness.