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Why we celebrate Easter

Long before arriving in Jerusalem to celebrate his final Passover, Jesus told the apostles, “The Son of Man will be handed over to the pagans. They will put him to death, and on the third day he will rise again.” It happened exactly as Jesus said it would happen.

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His disciples witnessed the crucifixion. They saw Jesus suffer intense pain for hours on end,

beginning with the arrest. They saw Jesus subjected to humiliation, hatred and contempt. Three hours on the cross was a torture that made men scream in agony.

Think how you would feel if you saw Jesus being branded as a liar and a false prophet. Think how you would feel if you saw the crowds choose Barabbas, as if Jesus were worse than a man guilty of murder. Think how you would feel if you saw Jesus stripped naked in public and condemned to execution together with two thieves.

The disciples witnessed this horrific spectacle. They saw Jesus being mocked even while he was praying, "My God, my God..." Little wonder that the Gospel records nothing resembling hope among our Lord's disciples, nothing to indicate belief that Jesus would rise from the dead.

The holy women were shocked when they saw an empty tomb. At first they assumed someone had stolen the dead body of Christ. They were dumbstruck when an angel suddenly appeared and asked, “Why are you looking among the dead for someone who is alive?” St Mark says that most of them “ran away from the tomb, frightened out of their wits.”

Have you ever imagined what you would have done if you were in Jerusalem on the third day? Would you be like Mary Magdalene, and be lucky enough to have Jesus appear to you before any of the others? Would you be more like those who refused to believe even after your friends told you, “We have seen the Lord”? Would you be like Peter who went running to the tomb? Would you be like Cleopas and his friend, walking away full of sadness, only to have your eyes opened when Jesus

revealed himself in the breaking of the bread?

The disciples of Christ still experience almost contradictory expectations—some filled with great faith, overflowing with joy; others confused and sad, passing through a moment of darkness. We celebrate Easter because we know that the Risen Lord will come looking for every one of us, whether we be like John who believed as soon as he saw the empty tomb, or like Thomas who believed only after Jesus appeared and told him to stop doubting.

This article by Fr. Joe Babendreier first appeared in the Sunday Nation in March 2013.

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