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Our Easter Question

Human beings are seekers. We are that part of creation come to conscious self-awareness, and we alone among the species have the ability to stand back, to ponder existence and to ask those big existential questions. We are always searching and longing. We have a deep drive to find truth and meaning, to see beyond the moment. And so we ask questions. We wonder and ponder, and we reflect on the questions asked of us too. Religion grows out of this distinctively human activity. And good religion will always make space for questions. Good religion does not overwhelm us with doctrine. Rather it is invitational. The invitation is to let Mystery lead us and find a home in us. And so questions are asked, stories are told. We are invited to work it out. And respond. As Jesus said, "Let those who have ears to hear, listen".

Jesus himself taught by telling stories and asking questions. When people came to him with their questions he invariably responded by asking them a question. Jesus did not indoctrinate people. He spoke in parables and riddles. He got people to let the images speak to them and open up possibilities. He got them to stop and think and indeed to take responsibility for their lives and for finding that meaning that alone will satisfy. With those stories ringing in their ears, those images surprising them and indeed shocking them too, they were invited into something magnificently 'other'. This frustrated those people who wanted answers and the security of laws. And as he did then, so he does now: he shakes our foundations and invites us into alternative images of ourselves, of the world, of our future, and of God.

Questions don't give us anywhere to hide. We can reject doctrine and law, but when a question is asked of us we find ourselves drawn into it. In the Gospels we find quite a few questions: "What are you looking for?" Jesus asks the two disciples of John who were following him. And to the blind man sitting at the side of the road, calling out to him, he asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" And then to the disciples, "Who do people say I am?", "And, you, who do *you* say I am?" And of course we have those great questions we heard on Good Friday - Pilate asking the crowd, "What shall I do with him? What evil has he done? What is truth?" And Jesus' question to Judas: "Is it with a kiss that you betray me?"

These questions really ask us to dig deep, for our responses to them will determine our life's course. And so it's no surprise that our Easter story asks a question too: "Why look among the dead for someone who is alive?" This year, our Resurrection story is the one told by

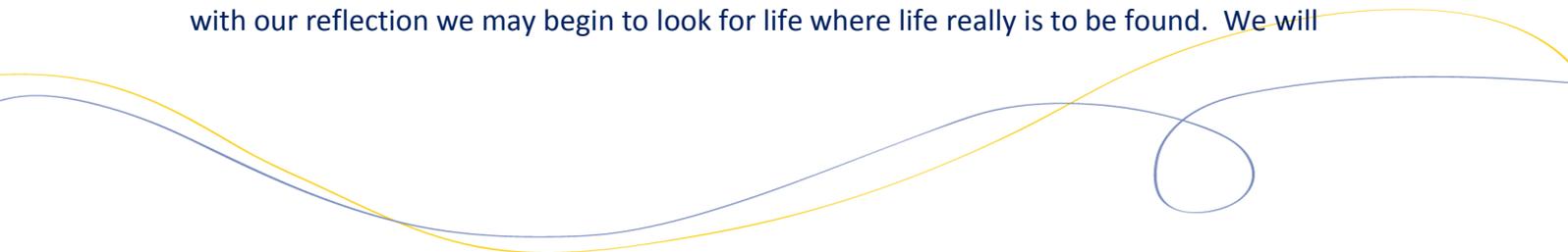
Luke. The women had gone to the tomb early that Sunday morning, taking the spices to anoint Jesus' body as was the Jewish burial custom. They were expecting to find death. They wondered who would roll away the stone from the tomb. But instead, when they got there, they were asked a question: "Why look for the living among the dead"? They were shocked, fearful, overcome, and they fell to the ground. They were asked to imagine the unimaginable.

This is the question Easter poses: Why look for life in places of death? And if I pause and give that question my attention, I find myself wandering into the intricacies of my life and my heart and asking yet more questions: Do I do that? Do I look for life in places of death? Where indeed do I look for life? Am I stuck in dead places? Do I regularly go to places that will not help me grow, or live joyfully or meaningfully, places that will cripple my humanity? Do I get stuck in resentments, in past failure, in those mental conversations that only take me deeper into justification of my ways, into hardness of heart? Do I feed myself with desires that are self-serving? Do I really believe I will find life there?

As we pause and allow this question to engage us we see that Easter, this magnificent season of fifty days, invites us to come out of the tomb. Overturn our expectations, let the tomb be empty. Let the burial shroud lie there as it falls. As Saint Paul so vividly puts it: "You must know how even a small amount of yeast is enough to leaven all the dough, so get rid of all the old yeast, and make yourselves into a completely new batch of bread".

But old habits die hard. "The ego hates losing - even to God", says spiritual writer and Franciscan priest, Richard Rohr. All too easily we remain in the tomb as we fall back into those default positions. We have to learn, over and over again, how to emerge from the tomb. At times it is obvious that we are looking in the wrong places for what is truly life-giving, but often too it's not that evident. We can become quite skilled in justifying our excessive wants and in protecting ourselves from anything that challenges us to emerge into something other. Thomas Merton, that great thinker, mystic and Trappist monk of the twentieth century, said: "If you want to identify me, ask me not where I live, or what I like to eat, or how I comb my hair, but ask me what I am living for, in detail, ask me what I think is keeping me from living fully for the thing I want to live for". That's certainly a question with a punch! What is keeping me from living fully for the thing I want to live for?

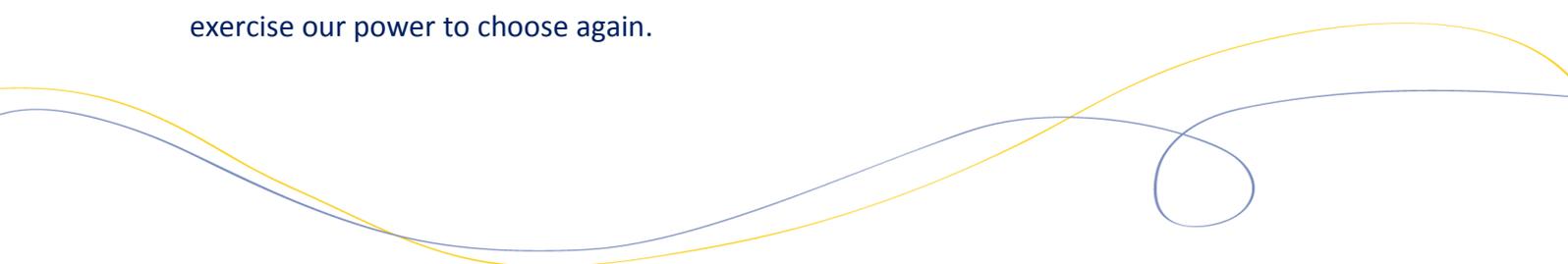
As we begin to ponder this question we will begin to recognise the twists and turns that we create that do keep us from living fully. And if we are honest and courageous and persist with our reflection we may begin to look for life where life really is to be found. We will



become Easter people. At the heart of Christian spirituality there is a paradox. It is the paradox of losing to find. This is also something which is counter-intuitive. We appear to have evolved to protect our future, to ensure the survival of our species. That means self-preservation, and so we don't always respond well to invitations to let go, to lose, to surrender, to die. There is a story in the Gospels about a young man who had a question for Jesus. He was a rich young man who was apparently also a good person, an observant Jew. He told Jesus that he had faithfully kept all the commandments since he was a youth, but he wanted to know, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" I wonder what made him ask that question. Was he tapping into that quiet but insistent voice that says there must be more to all this? Jesus told him to go and sell everything he owned, to give the money to the poor and to follow him. This was not what the young man was expecting to hear, for he walked away sad, we are told. Perhaps he was hoping for another commandment, something he could easily understand and fulfil. But this was asking him to enter the unknown. It was an invitation, not a commandment.

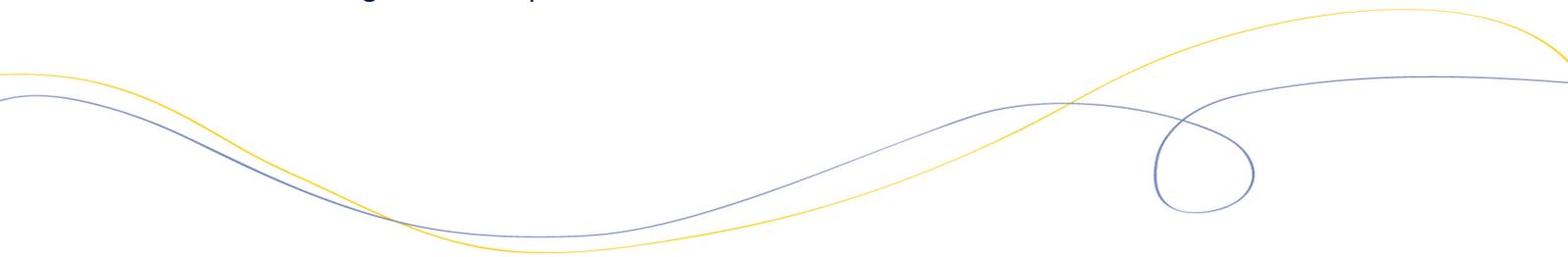
An invitation asks us to think deeply, to choose how we will respond. Although it seems that we have evolved to protect and preserve self, there is something about our humanity that I think is even more deeply intuitive. Saint Augustine puts it beautifully: "You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you". This is where we find that paradox again: to rest in God we are invited to lose all else, "sell everything and follow me". "The most amazing fact about Jesus", says Rohr, "unlike almost any other religious founder, is that he found God in disorder and imperfection - and told us that we must do the same or we would never be content on this earth" (*The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See*).

Christianity invites us to embrace a redeeming God, not a rescuing God. The Passion of Jesus makes that clear. God did not rescue Jesus from the powerful forces that ultimately took his life. As he endured a humiliating and degrading death, that reserved for slaves and criminals, the crowd jeered, "If God is your Father, let him rescue you!" But instead, God enters the pain, the darkness, the humiliation and death, and redeems. These things did not have the final word. The story of the empty tomb, the abandoned burial shroud, the stone rolled away, is a story of the redemption of life. As Jesus entered the ultimate darkness and there surrendered himself to God, so Life rose in him. If we let this Easter question speak quietly into our own hearts - Why look for the living among the dead? - it will invite us to overturn our expectations of where life might be found and to examine our response and exercise our power to choose again.



There is much current research about happiness and what makes us happy. The findings indicate that caring about others actively increases our own happiness. TED speaker and economist, Paul Zak, for example, has studied the link between happiness and empathy and the chemical reactions in our bodies that result in feelings of happiness. He found elevated levels of oxytocin in people connecting with others on social media. He found the same spike in a subject watching a video of a father staying at the side of his dying son. He found that tweeting at friends or looking at updates from loved ones on Facebook seemed to evoke a similar response to that of personal interaction - an increase in feeling happy. "In the end", Zak says, "our greatest joy comes from connecting with those around us: If I'm a totally selfish person and I want to maximize my own happiness, I've got to reach out. I've got to go volunteer, I've got to help other people. I've got to engage with others". However, a 2014 article in The Huffington Post reported that we are surprisingly bad at predicting what will make us happy. It also mentions the 'if only' fantasies that people have about what will make them happy and the 'hedonic adaptation', the brain's natural dimming effect. A new house, for example, won't generate the same pleasure as it did a year after purchase. The thrill of having a boyfriend will lessen as you get used to being a couple. Given this, we need to seriously consider our dreams, our decisions about what we do, what we put our energy into and what we make our life's focus. All research indicates that the capacity to love and be loved is the single most important factor.

These findings are expressing and providing physiological evidence for what ancient religious truths have always taught us. No wonder there is so much in the world's religious traditions about how to create and sustain good and loving relationships. And Christianity, with its key ethical teaching of love has much to say about this: serve one another, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, visit the sick, do to others as you would like them to do to you, forgive one another - repeatedly, don't let the sun go down on your anger, share what you have with those in need, feel the joys and sorrows of others, walk beside them, avoid hasty words spoken in anger, don't focus on amassing wealth, that 'treasure' which rust and moth devour, for where your treasure is there your heart will be too. And Jesus' ultimate act of love on the cross as he prayed that God might forgive those who put him to death. These are tough things to do. Often they are counter instinctive because they are not about self-preservation. And because to do those things means that we must risk becoming vulnerable, we often try to avoid them. But even as we do that, there is the empty tomb, speaking its silent mystery into our hearts, posing that question and beckoning to us to respond.



“Easter Sunday does not flinch from the public brutality and corruption of Good Friday and the ripping apart of a man’s hopes, promises, friendships and self-respect”, writes Andrew Hamilton SJ. “All these things took place and are written in stone. But that is not all that is to be said. Something waits, light as air, which whips and hammers cannot smash, nor can betrayal and hatred crush. Even in the smashing and unravelling, God is present, turning chains to dust and desperation to hope. On Easter Day the darkness of Good Friday is made translucent and life-bearing. Deadly earnestness yields to laughter” (Andrew Hamilton SJ Eureka Street 24/3/16).

So as we move through the fifty days of Easter, let’s take time to ponder and let these beautiful words from the Book of Baruch, one of the prophetic Books of the Bible, settle into our hearts:

Learn where knowledge is, where strength,
where understanding, and so learn
where length of days is, where life,
where the light of the eyes and where peace.

Ms Kerry McCullough
Dean of Mission

