

Easter Day.

Sunday April 24<sup>th</sup> 2011.

**Alleluia! the Lord is risen!  
He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

**Hymns:** 193: Christ the Lord is risen today! Alleluia!  
Special: We walk where reason may not tread.  
610: I come with joy to meet my Lord.  
212: Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son.

**Readings:** Acts 10: 34-43  
John 20: 1-18

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It's exactly a hundred and fifty years since the country we now know as Italy was born. The heroic exploits of a romantic adventurer named Garibaldi, a man who gave his name to a biscuit, in the poor southern parts and of the more aristocratic Cavour in the rich north, knocked a bunch of principalities, dukedoms and papal estates into a coherent whole. The history of Italy sees it proceed from the Holy Roman Empire all the way down to the present day realities of the unholy media empire of Signor Berlusconi. We can only wonder at the direction of travel. Forward? Or backward?

I shall never forget the long weekend we once spent in Florence. For a short while, before the emerging Italy had established its new capital in Rome, this was the seat of government. We actually stayed in a hotel which had served as its parliament. All around us, as we sat eating our breakfast, were monuments and inscriptions honouring the heroes who created Italy. Their long struggle for independence was called *Risorgimento*, the uprising, a phenomenon very similar to those we've seen recently in Tunisia and Egypt. Those were heady days.

When we left our hotel, we stepped into a wonderland, a city of dreams. All around us were some of the greatest masterpieces of art and culture ever realised. The wall paintings of Piero della Francesca, the masterpieces of Michelangelo, the telescopes of Galileo, the poetry of Dante (just to name my favourites) – everywhere we went, we saw things and sensed things we'd known about since we took our first books into our hands. This was one of the cities which gave us what we came to call the *Renaissance* – a new beginning, literally a new birth, after the long centuries following the collapse of the ancient Roman Empire.

Our visit to Florence took place over the weekend following Easter Sunday and churches over the whole city were still adorned with huge banks of white flowers. They were everywhere and bore brilliant testimony to the greatest Feast in the Christian calendar; we couldn't but sense those soaring hymns and outbursts of joy, that had so recently greeted this day of days, this celebration of the victory of life over death, the event we call the *Resurrection*.

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There you have it. The three R's, evidence all around us of some of the mightiest moments in human history. Just think of it:

- *Risorgimento*, the birth of a new nation;
- *Renaissance*, the rebirth of an old continent;
- *Resurrection*, new birth for the whole human race.

What we celebrate today has cosmic significance. The fact that Jesus came through all that suffering, mental as well as physical, without losing his essential self is enormously important for the programme he was putting forward. He'd always said that there could be no self-fulfilment without self-sacrifice; that a readiness to serve was the very hallmark of a meaningful life; that the qualities of mercy and forgiveness were not strained; that love was the fulfilling of the law. He'd always said these things and he'd always demonstrated them. He'd lived out the very programme he was speaking about. He was what he said, he did himself what he asked others to do, he walked the talk, he was truly the Word of God made flesh. But those last few days pushed him to the very brink. This was a test of his principles and his beliefs carried out under the most severe pressure imaginable. But his spirit was not diminished, his greatness of heart in no way destroyed. The cross may well have been thought of as a symbol of shame, an instrument of torture, a sign of defeat. But it was love, - warm-blooded, heart-warming, love that flowed down from the man who hung there. Isaac Watts got it as near perfect as anyone could:

*See from his head, his hands, his feet,  
Sorrow and love flow mingled down;  
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,  
Or thorns compose so rich as crown?*

Love as well as sorrow, a crown despite the thorns, victory snatched from the jaws of defeat. That's the road we've travelled with Jesus over this last week. A *via dolorosa* which, today, we proclaim as a *via gloriosa*. Suffering certainly. But glory in the end.

But that doesn't get us to the end of the story. That simply took us to Friday. Today, new dimensions appear in view. Jesus was raised from the dead. Suffering didn't diminish him, pain didn't destroy his spirit, and now, the greatest triumph of them all, even death proved unable to hold him in its clammy grasp. As you consider this great and wonderful event, don't allow yourself to get lost in the detail of how it might have happened or whether it could have happened. Just look at the way a dispirited bunch of men and women, grieving the loss of their beloved friend and weary with the effects of all they'd been through in the previous few days, were suddenly transformed. They sparkled with new life. Hope surged through them where there had previously only been dark despair. And in days, the whole of Jerusalem was filled with the news. Nor did it stop there. The message went on spreading out into the world beyond Judea, across the Middle East,

around the Mediterranean basin. Within two or three generations, the story of Jesus had spread around the whole of the known world. It injected energy into human activity and gave a shape to human history. The Easter event was a pivotal moment, a turning point in the affairs of men and women.

A man with whom I've become very friendly is David Montgomery, the Second Viscount Montgomery of Alamein. His father, "Monty", was a general in the British Army whose victory over his enemy in the deserts of North Africa changed the direction of the second world war. It used to be said that before Alamein our forces had known no victory whereas, after Alamein, they were to know no defeat. I want to snatch that phrase and shape it for my own purpose. Before Easter there was no victory. Death ruled supreme. But after Easter, there is no defeat. "Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

This victory has cosmic proportions – it represents a triumph not merely for nations, a latter-day *risorgimento*; nor even a *renaissance* – the rebirth of a continent. No, the *resurrection* of Jesus is an event which changes the name of the game for the whole of humanity across time and throughout space. It's as if the tectonic plates of human experience had shifted with the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth; shifted in such a way that a tsunami of new energy has been released that floods irresistibly into human hearts while redefining the horizons of human hope. Nothing can ever be the same again.

That should be enough, it's plenty to be getting on with. But this morning's sermon can't just end there. It's all very well to speak of the cosmic dimensions of the Easter Event but we are inevitably left with a pressing question. How does all this fine talk affect me? How do I experience whatever it is that follows on from the resurrection of Jesus? Bring it down to earth. We need to spell it out for each one of us here today. It's a grand message that needs to be personalised, customised, appropriated by us all.

We can begin to do that by looking at that wonderful moment of recognition that appears in that ancient story. Mary Magdalene heads for the tomb to see for herself whether the reports of Peter and John that body of Jesus is no longer in the tomb is true. She sees someone she supposes to be a gardener and asks him if he's seen anything that might help her find Jesus. He offers a one-word response. "Mary," he cries. The calling of her name immediately establishes contact between them. The scales fall from her eyes. "Rabbouni, teacher," she replies. And the risen Jesus becomes part of her life again, reshaping it for new realities, lifting her spirits in one fell swoop.

I had a similar experience recently when I visited Haiti, a country still seized by the trauma of last year's earthquake. I visited some of those tented villages where almost a million people still live their miserable lives in tents that have long since passed their sell-by date. It was raining heavily as I passed through one of these camps and I begged

leave of a poor woman to take shelter in her tent. I sat alongside her on the makeshift bed which, together with some simple belongings, constituted the entire furniture of that mean abode. I wanted to make conversation, mainly to apologise for intruding into her space like this. I began by asking her to tell me her name. Her face looked so forlorn and bore signs of resentment. Only with difficulty did I hear her mumbled reply. "Viola," I said, trying to make the best of what I'd heard. She shook her head. I made a second attempt. Once again her reply was indistinct. Once again, I gave it my best shot. "Julia," I suggested. This time there was a touch of anger, or impatience, or both in her dismissal of my effort. No, she clearly wasn't Julia. With great diffidence, I tried a third time. And this time I got it. "Dieu-lă," I declared triumphantly. I was right. And her face told me so. All the grim features disappeared. Light shone in her eyes where previously only dullness reigned. She laughed at my stupidity in getting her name wrong the previous times. We laughed together and, just for a moment, that wretched tent seemed filled with light. Just speaking her name had brought life back into her misery. And, wonder of wonders, her name, Dieu-lă, means "God is here."

The risen Jesus calls out to each of us by name. His resurrection gives us a new and revitalising relationship with a source of energy and power that can lift our lives onto a new plane. The resurrection of Jesus may have cosmic consequences. But it's also a reality that can change your life and mine. Here. Now.

Alleluia! the Lord is risen!  
He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Amen.