

# The Joy and Threat of Easter

Dr. Justo L. González

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AETH

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[info@aeth.org](mailto:info@aeth.org)

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Matthew 28.9-15a

*Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."*

*While they were going, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests everything that had happened. After the priests had assembled with the elders, they devised a plan to give a large sum of money to the soldiers, telling them, "You must say, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.' If this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." So they took the money and did as they were directed.*

This coming Sunday has traditionally been called "Low Sunday." There is ample reason for that.

It is "low" in that attendance usually drops drastically after the high point of Easter Sunday.

And it is also "low" in that, after the euphoria of Easter, we begin to settle back into the normal, not-so-bright dreariness of everyday life. It is almost as if, after all the celebration, Jesus had not indeed risen.

The Gospel text for this coming Sunday also contrasts the highest and the lowest points of Easter.

On the one hand, there is the exhilarating news of the resurrection: "Suddenly Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings!' And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him."

And on the other, there is the stubborn attempt to hide the truth of the resurrection: "You must say, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep'."

We would like to think that, between these two options, we always choose the first. And indeed, this is true inasmuch as we confess: "He is risen. He is risen indeed."

And yet, there is also a hidden, often unacknowledged, side of us that would like to deny the resurrection. Because the resurrection is not only a word of joy. It is also a challenge and a threat to our normal, everyday way of living.

This may well have been so even for those first disciples who saw him in his resurrected flesh. After the rollercoaster experience of their life with Jesus, they had finally come to the crucifixion and burial. It was now time to go home. Back to fishing. Back to the counting table. Back to Galilee. Back to family. Back to predictable routine.

And now, suddenly, Jesus meets them and says, "Greetings!"

The Lord is risen. What a joy! But this is the Lord who also promised them a cross like his. This is the Lord whom you cannot follow without carrying the cross. Now they cannot simply go back to Galilee, and to family, and to fishing nets, and to tell stories about how it was to follow Jesus. Now they must follow him to the cross! And so, one may well imagine that, just as they

rejoiced, they were also, as Guatemalan poet Julia Esquivel would say, "threatened by resurrection."

In a different way, the chief priests and other religious leaders were also threatened by resurrection. They were threatened by a resurrection that would prove that the stone that they, the builders, had rejected had indeed become the chief cornerstone. And so, they try to conceal the resurrection.

Today, as the celebrations of Easter become a thing of the past and Low Sunday approaches, we must confess that we, too, —at the time that we rejoice and confess that the Lord has risen—are threatened by resurrection.

Jesus has risen! He is risen indeed! This means that the call to take up the cross and follow him is just as valid and just as unavoidable as it was as he walked among his disciples.

Jesus is risen! He is risen indeed! This means that life cannot go on as before. That we cannot return to whatever our Galilees are, to whatever nets we have left behind.

Jesus is risen! He is risen indeed! This means that what would normally be our signs of success —our nets full of fish— will no longer be such; that henceforth we must measure our lives by other standards.

Things would be so simple, had he just been a teller of beautiful parables, if he had been just a teacher of lofty ideals, if he had been one more of many who have been killed for their idealism, for their opposition to the established order, for the fear of those in power!

But no. He is risen! He is risen indeed! And so, the call still stands: "Take up your cross and follow me." And so, the promise still stands: "In the world you face persecution." And so, the admonition still stands: "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul." And so, we too, like the Guatemalan poet, and even like the chief priests of yore, are threatened by resurrection. So, we settle into Low Sunday and the many other common days to follow.

Significantly, in the passage that has been read there is another contrast between the disciples who encounter Jesus and the chief priests who seek to deny his resurrection. For the chief priests, the proof that must be denied is the empty tomb, the absence of the body. For the disciples, the proof that cannot be denied is the presence of the living Lord, the presence of his body.

It is not the empty tomb that impels the disciples to witness, and to obedience, and even to death. It is the presence of the living Lord, the resurrection of the Crucified, that leads them to take their cross in the hope and the certainty of their own resurrection.

And, even as it was for those first disciples, it still is for us today. Ours is the faith of the present Lord. Ours is a faith that is certified, not by an empty tomb long ago, but by a presence here, today, now, at this table. Ours is a faith that is nourished by that presence. And, because He is present, and because his presence nourishes us, even on Low Sunday we can say —and say with fear and trepidation, but also with trust and joy— that He is risen, He is risen indeed!

