He Is Risen! He Is Not Here! .... Story of the Empty Tomb

—A silhouette cut-out illustration by Sister Mary Jean, O. S.

By Rev. Patrick J. Flynn

He is risen! He is not here!

This is the unique epitaph of only one person—Jesus Christ. History can point to many tombs, "Here" it says, "lies Napoleon" . . . "Here lies Lincoln" . . . "Here lies Shakespeare." But only before the empty tomb of Christ does the Voice of History speak with genuine reverence and declare emphatically: "He is risen! He is not here!"

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During the late afternoon of Good Friday the Divine Master is taken down from the Cross by a few friends. Hastily they bury Him in a tomb near Calvary.

They have in hurry this work of love. The sacred hour of the High Sabbath is at hand. The enemies of Christ are uneasy. They place a guard of soldiers before the tomb. The friends of Christ go home. They are hopeless. They expect nothing. For them the burial of Christ marks the end of everything . . . Throughout the long hours of the Sabbath all Jerusalem is given to prayer. Outside the City Christ's Body is hidden away behind a wall of rock.

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Very early on Sunday morning long frail figures creep through the glimmering pre-dawn shadows. These are the Holy Women — Mary Magdalene, Mary the Mother of the Apostle Jacob, Salome and Joanna. They are headed for the tomb to complete the embalming which the approach of the Sabbath Eve had prevented them from doing as properly as they wished.

Mary Magdalene is in the vanguard of this small group of women. She is the leader. She is impatient to reach the garden where Christ's tomb is located. As the women hurry along they begin to worry. Who will roll back the stone which seals the entrance to the tomb? Even as they speak a great earthquake rocks the City. The women are unaware but in the garden beyond the drama of the ages is taking place.

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As the earthquake shakes the City and its environs an Angel descends before the tomb and rolls back the stone. From the darkness of the tomb comes forth the glorious Christ. His countenance shines like lightning and His garments are dazzling like clouds snow. Witness to all this are the soldier guards. The event terrifies them and they fall back to the ground dead with fear.

The earthquake does not deter the Holy Women. Mary Magdalene leads them on towards the garden. They pass Calvary, the scene of the Crucifixion. When they round the hill they are in sight of the tomb. Even at a distance the women are enough to make them stop suddenly.

They are shocked and dismayed. Through the morning shadows they can see the dark opening in the side of the rock shield. The mighty stone blocking the entrance is flat on the ground. Christ's enemies had violated His tomb and stolen His Body . . . This is the obvious conclusion for the Holy Women to make.

The impetuous Magdalene decides quickly. She will race back to the City and tell Peter and John — the two favorite Apostles of the Master — the shameful discovery. She leaves her companions to approach the tomb and examine the details of the desecration.

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As Mary Magdalene hastens back to the City the other women come close to the tomb. The guards still lie on the ground in their stupor of fear. The anxiety and wonderment of the women intensify when they notice the angelic figure who commands the opening to the tomb. Instinctively the women guess that this angelic sentinel had something to do with rolling back the stone. They halt reverently before his radiant presence and wait for him to speak. Gazing at the exalted and trembling women the angel speaks a message of calm and assurance: "Fear not you, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified."

"He is not here," the angelic voice continues, "for He is risen, as He said. Come and see the place where the Lord was laid."

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Encouraged by the angelic invitation, now yields to curiosity and the women crowd into the rock-hewn sepulchre. The Body of Christ is gone! Only the shroud which had clothed Him is there as a mute memorial of the place where He had lain. As the women stare and try to grasp the situation they hear the angelic voice speak again.

"He is not here, but is risen. Remember how He spoke unto you when He was yet in Galilee saying: 'The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again.'"

Understanding dawns in the minds of the women. How many times they had heard Christ say that He would suffer and die but that He would rise again. Now everything is simple to these simple women, who are the first to understand the surprise of the empty tomb.

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Once more the angel speaks to the Holy Women. This time he gives them a commandment.

"Go, tell His disciples and Peter that He is risen. And behold He will go before you into Galilee. There you shall see Him."

Trembling with the joy of their secret the women hurry out of the sepulchre and run towards the City to break the news of the resurrection to the disciples.

Meanwhile Mary Magdalene had aroused Peter and John with her report that Christ's Body had been stolen. The other women arrive shortly with the sensation that Christ has risen. The Apostles are skeptical and reject the news of the resurrection as the idle tale of hysterical women.

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Peter and John, however, decide to have a look for themselves. Together they set out for the tomb. Anticipation and excitement make them eager and they begin to run. John outruns the older Peter and reaches the tomb first but does not enter. Peter arrives and boldly rushes into the sepulchre.

More cautiously John follows him. The two apostles are impressed by what they see. The Body is gone but the burial cloths remain. There is no sign of vandalism or irreverence. The cloth that covered the Master's head is neatly folded and laid apart by itself.

John later admits that from this moment he believed in the resurrection of Christ and we can fairly assume that Peter also believed. They had not understood that Christ was to rise again and the story of the resurrection is as much a surprise to them as it would be to Pilate and the High-priest.

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As night is repelled the sorrowful Magdalene returns to the Sepulchre. She is inconsolable and still unaware that the Body of Christ has been stolen. She stands alone and weeping before the tomb. The apostles have already left.

Still weeping she stoops and peers into the sepulchre. There the grief-stricken Magdalene sees two angels, clothed in white, and seated one at the head and one at the foot, of the rock ledge on which Christ's Body had rested.

"Woman, why weepest thou?" the angels ask her.

Magdalene [illegible] the angels as [illegible] "Because they have taken away my Lord. The Body of Christ! Where is it? This is Magdalene's single concern. the Body of my Lord, and I know not where they have laid Him."

Failing to recognize the angelic strangers she has no interest in them. As she turns and steps forth from the tomb she is confronted by the Risen Christ. Magdalene has no expectation of a living Christ. She seeks only His dead Body. Confused and crying she does not recognize the familiar Figure before her.

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She hears Him say to her, "Woman, why weepest thou? Whom seekest thou?" This man must be the gardener, she thinks. Maybe He knows something. Desperately she pleads with Him.

"Sir, if thou hast taken Him hence, tell me where thou hast laid Him and I will take Him away."

In answer Christ addresses the sobbing woman with a familiar voice: "Mary!" Instantly the tear-stained face of Magdalene lights up with joy, and she cries, "Rabboni! Master!" Now her tears are tears of joy. She would embrace the Master's feet but He stops her. Within the hour Magdalene is back in Jerusalem and telling her friends, "I have seen the Lord."

Later on the evening of the Resurrection the Apostles are gathered in a room in Jerusalem. Behind locked doors they debate the events of the day. Suddenly the glorious Christ stands in their midst. Holding forth His nail-pierced hands He calms them. "Peace be to you. Fear not. It is I."

The Day of the Resurrection passed but the discovery of that day is imperishable in the memory of the world. Men never tire of hearing the Story of the Empty Tomb . . . "He is risen! He is not here!" . . . "He is the Resurrection and the Life!"

Purple Heart

By Marion J. O'Connor

The Saviour wore a purple heart
Hung from a tattered breast.
The gift His Father's loving hand
Conferred on Calvary's crest.

The Saviour felt the soldier's lance
With mocking thrust delide.
And blood from His all-loving Heart
Poured down His tortured Side!

The Saviour knew His Mother's pain
Would be there to unfold
The purple heart of her dead Son
So silent, Maiden, cold!

The Saviour knows the world of woe
This war has not spent.
And Mary shares each mother's grief
For her son's purple heart!

FORTY HOURS

Devotions of the Forty Hours are scheduled in the following churches of the Rochester Diocese: Sunday, Apr. 8—Sacred Heart, Lockport; Mount Pleasant, Rochester; Holy Spiritsport; Wednesday

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