



Office of the President Rector

ST. MARY'S SEMINARY & UNIVERSITY

Founded 1791

Letters from the Park

Letter #5

April 12, 2020

Easter Sunday

Easter Hope

To the Larger St. Mary's Community: *Letters from the Park* are weekly letters from Fr. Brown to St. Mary's seminarians who have been sent home during the Covid-19 emergency that he would like to share also with the larger St. Mary's community and friends and supporters of St. Mary's.

Dear Seminarians,

The past week has been the most normal week for me since the Covid-19 emergency began. Why normal? Because every year everyone from the seminary goes home for Holy Week, and the seminary becomes very quiet, with very little activity, other than what I generate for myself (aside from getting ready for Holy Week and Easter liturgies). In another way it was very different; historic in fact. Not only because of the emergency and staying home, but because, I was told, when we celebrated the Easter Vigil here (Archbishop Lori gave us, living here in isolation, special permission to celebrate it together) it was very likely the first time since before Vatican II, over fifty years ago. It was very special; it had a special feel; subdued, but grace-filled. We were so very aware of all those who were unable to celebrate the Vigil together in a church this year; all those whose baptism and reception into the Church has been postponed; those who are sick; those who are mourning a loved one who has died of the virus; all those in mourning, all who are sick, all who are alone. They were our special intention for the Mass; you, too. So I thought that for my letter this week I would just share with you my Easter homily from our celebration of the Vigil, adapted a bit for this letter:

When a tree falls in the forest, does it make a sound? I remember the first time I heard the supposed brain teaser in one of my high school classes. I thought it was a little silly. Of course it makes a sound, I thought to myself. On the other hand, I guess it depends on what you mean by a sound: Air waves disturbed so as to be discernible to the hearing of human beings and other animals? Or is there a sound only when the disturbance is actually perceived by someone. I guess that's what philosophers dispute over and high school teachers tease adolescent minds with.

"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved," Paul tells us (Rom. 10:13). "But how can they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone to preach?"

If a man were to emerge from the tomb, but no one saw it, would he have truly risen from the dead? But Jesus was seen, they say, not perhaps at that moment, but later when he appeared to them; reverberations of resurrection from the dead: The foundation of Christian faith; the real source of Christian hope: “. . . if Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain; you are still in your sins. Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are the most pitiable people of all.” (I Cor. 15:14-19)

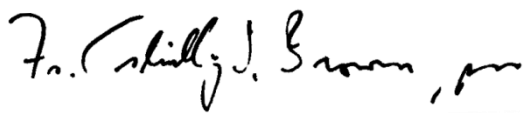
Aside from the Gospels, there is no documentation claiming that Jesus rose from the dead; no contemporaneous assertions that Jesus of Nazareth actually rose from death to be seen later by his disciples, as recorded in the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles and alluded to in other New Testament writings. Belief that Jesus rose from death is based entirely on the testimony of his disciples, who claimed to have witnessed his tomb empty, and later to have encountered him, knowing the one they encountered to be him, the same and yet different, a physical, carnal man with a physical, carnal yet somehow glorified body; who, after a time ceased appearing to them; whose last appearance and departure they experienced and described as an Ascension into heaven. We have only their heartfelt testimony, no other evidence, nothing otherwise written down in the historical record, no DNA, no forensic proof; only *their* word; only *our own* heartfelt belief.

Even in the face of their testimony, the world went on as it was. Even in the face of our heartfelt belief, the world goes on as it is, and as it has been. But for those who believe, the world is changed, in the twinkling of an eye (I Cor. 15:52); transformed; renewed; filled with hope in spite of it all; regardless of what may come, what calamities, what baptisms of fire, whatever must be endured, whatever we must and will emerge from.

A triumph for disciples. Victory for believers—but for the rest of the world, the unbelieving world? Things go on as they have. For those blinded by the reality of death, those blinded by sin and death: darkness, resignation, even despair. For those who see with eyes of faith, who hear with ears of faith, with believing hearts: transformation and light; hope; conviction; joy.

The columnist Daniel Henninger, writing about the Covid-19 crisis this week ended his column saying “For Christians and Jews, this is among the holiest weeks of the year, when, in a word, all *prepare* spiritually for Easter and Passover. Both events are about passing into and out of a crucible. Inside these faiths, loss becomes endurable through the promise of deliverance. It’s worth remembering for at least one week.”

For Christians, faith sustains us and will sustain us through Covid-19, because it sustains and will sustain us through the crisis of human existence, with its consciousness of the reality of suffering and death. But for Christians it’s certainly more than enduring calamities through the promise of deliverance. For Christians, death leads to life; a passage from life in this world to life in the next; life that is eternal. For Christians something we remember not just for a week, but every day of our lives to the Day of Resurrection.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr. Phillip J. Brown, SJ". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.