

On June 18, 1815, the combined forces of Austria, Russia, Great Britain, and Prussia under the leadership of Duke Arthur Wellesley Wellington, engaged the army of the French Empire under Napoleon Bonaparte in an epic battle to decide the outcome of the war for the European continent. There, near the Belgium town of Waterloo, those two armies collided in fierce combat. By prearranged agreement, the British army at the end of the day was to signal back to the coast the outcome of that battle through a series of smoke signals. The message would then be communicated across the English Channel and hand delivered to the King of England in the city of London.

As evening approached at the end of that day's fierce fighting, in which more than 25,000 men lost their lives, English communication experts on the coast awaited the smoke signals declaring either victory over that dreaded foe or defeat of their army. Soon their wait came to an end. Over the top of a distant hillside, they were able to make out the distinctive smoke signal message from Waterloo, and they began to translate it. The first word was unmistakable: "Wellington." The second word also soon followed, and it said, "defeated." However, as soon as those two words were received, the wind suddenly shifted and the sky was filled with dark, low clouds. They were left with the message, "Wellington defeated." In great sorrow, they turned and communicated that fact across the English Channel and on to King George and the people of England. That night, all of England lay in deep sorrow, heartbroken to receive the news that their general, Arthur Wellington, had been defeated by the French emperor, Napoleon. For now it seemed that there was no hope of stopping the expansion of Napoleon's power and no hope for them for the future. They had only but to wait until Napoleon's forces eventually crossed the channel, invaded their homeland and placed them as well under his rule. After a dark night of despair, the following morning British soldiers once again searched the skies for messages. And once again they saw the word, "Wellington," signalled to them. The next word was also the same, "defeated." But this time, in the bright blue skies of a morning sun, a third word appeared; a word that made all the difference in the world, a word that changed their sadness into joy, their grief into rejoicing, for the third word read, "Napoleon." You see, the correct message, the complete message that they were unable to receive the night before read "Wellington defeated Napoleon." And the rest is history. Napoleon's army was conquered and freedom for the European continent was secured. For Napoleon had met his Waterloo....

May I suggest to you that something like what happened at Waterloo so many years ago happened in Jerusalem at the death of Christ? The scriptures tell us that early in the morning on the first day of the week, Mary went to the tomb of Jesus to grieve his death. The spices and embalming items indicated her intention. Her tears spoke her anguish. The message on her heart was: Jesus defeated. Death had done him in. Death had won over the Saviour, for he was dead and gone.

Now, I suppose that's an understandable feeling. I suppose we can forgive her mistake. Religion says that death is a passage to a new life. But when death comes to a loved one, when death visits someone near, when it is the death of a friend we cherish, it's hard to see the whole message. Death obscures our sight. Death clouds our vision. Death puts us in a fog and keeps us from seeing. That's how it was for Mary, and even worse. For Jesus was more than friend to her, more than just a loved one. He was the one she believed in. He was the one she hoped was the Saviour. So when Mary stood outside the tomb, she was convinced that it was over. She was certain it was done. Gone were her hopes for the future. Gone was her faith in God, for Jesus was defeated. Perhaps that's why when she got to the tomb, things really got confusing. For when she arrived at the tomb, the stone had been rolled away. And when she didn't find a body inside, she assumed someone had taken it. What more

must she endure? The arrest in the garden; the trials before Herod and Pilate, then Jesus' flogging and whipping, and his cruel death on the cross, it was more than she could stand, so she fled away. Running quickly back to the disciples, Mary told them what she had seen. "They have taken Jesus' body and I don't know where to find it." Peter and John went running to the tomb to see what happened and Mary came along behind overcome by grief.

For she could not believe it, for her the message was clear. Jesus was defeated. Jesus was dead and gone. No one expects the dead to rise. No one believes it can happen. In this world, the dead don't get second chances. Death is final. DEFEATED is what it says.

Before we criticise Mary on her unbelief, let us look at ourselves. We are much like Mary. We see all the signs and yet fail to believe. We can be surrounded by people in whom faith abounds in deeds of kindness and love, and yet fail to understand what faith can mean for us. We can sit in sanctuaries with lovely stained glass receiving the sacrament. We can sing hymns of praise and prayer. We can join in Easter celebrations and go home unchanged, untouched by the miracle. Don't believe me? Then ask yourself these questions: Do you open a newspaper more often than the Holy Scriptures or a commentary/spiritual work on them? Do you spend more time walking the dog than in prayer? Or how about the music on your lips? Do you know the latest advertising jingle or top twenty hit better than you know any song in the hymnal? Do you spend more time getting annoyed with something in the liturgy or music before during and after the service than you did in letting God's spirit run in and through you at the time? Are you so overcome in grief that you cannot see much good in anything....?

We are much like Mary; slow to believe, slow to change, hearing only part of the message. Like Mary, we can stand at the mouth of the open tomb and still cannot see. We can look Jesus right in the face and not see him or his works. We hear the words of the angels and let our lives be untouched by the miracle of Jesus' resurrection from the dead and all we read of the message is "JESUS DEFEATED".

The good news of Easter is that God knows how hard it is for us to believe. God knows how tightly our sinful, human nature clings to this world. God knows how easily our hearts drift from faith, how quickly our lives betray us. And because of that God reminds us of the full message. Easter proclaims, "JESUS DEFEATED DEATH." That's the rest of the message. That's the whole story. Because he lives, we shall live also. The message of Easter is that life is not over at the grave. The dead do rise in Christ, for Jesus defeated death. The message of Easter is that life does not end in darkness; life is not over when we die. For Jesus defeated death. That is the message we believe, the words that we hold true, our hope for the future, our joy of life with God. Jesus defeated death. And because he lives we shall live also. His victory is our victory. His resurrection is our resurrection. His rising to new life is new life for us as well. It was not until Jesus spoke Mary's name that she believed. It wasn't until he said, "Mary," that she recognised him. And that's an important thing for us to remember. Faith always comes from hearing. Faith is ours when God speaks our name. Faith is dependent upon God's word and sacrament for us. It is God's action in our lives and God's grace in our hearts. Faith is born when we hear God; it is ours when God speaks.

Want to grow in faith? Then draw nearer to God's people in worship and allow God to speak to you. Want to experience the presence of Christ more fully? Then stand closer to him and listen for him in prayer. Join us in worship, in the receiving of the body and blood of Christ. Open the Bible, read it more faithfully and bow your head more often in prayer. Stretch your spiritual muscles by reaching out in love to someone in need. For Jesus defeated death. That is the glorious message of Easter.

Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, we are set free, free from death's cold grip, free from our sins and wrongdoings, freed to live as children of God. When Mary heard Jesus speak her name, she knew the rest of the message. That's why she fell at his feet in worship. And that's where we belong as well. Such is the joy God has for us when we hear the rest of the message. Such is God's grace for us. The message is not "Jesus defeated." The message of Easter is that God's grace has triumphed. Death's power is gone. Death's rule is over. The message is "Jesus defeated death." He is triumphant forevermore. He is the Lord of Life and the Saviour of our soul. And this is the message that God speaks to our world today. Jesus defeated death. May God bless us this Easter with hearts full of joy. Amen.

Fr Robert Newton