

FROM THE PASTOR'S



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THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX OUR SPIRITUAL GUIDE FOR THE EASTER SEASON

The following article does an excellent job of connecting four themes from the Easter Season with excerpts from the Little Flower's *Story of a Soul*. The article was written by Sr. Catherine Looker, who serves as an assistant professor of religious studies at Chestnut Hill College in Philadelphia. She writes:

A few years ago, Mary, a 40-year-old mother of two teenage sons, asked a curious question: "Shouldn't I be able to sing 'Alleluia, alleluia,' on Easter morning?"

She continued, "I'm not referring to my vocal ability, since I've known for years that I'm not a great singer. I just wonder what I am to do when Easter Day dawns and I'm not able to sing 'Alleluia' because I really don't feel the joy of Easter. Oh, for sure, in some ways I'm glad that Lent is over and that the season of spring has arrived; I am not always, however, in an Alleluia frame of mind or heart at this time of year. For that's what it's all about, isn't it? I want to feel the joy of Easter and sing 'Alleluia.' I really want to mean that with all of my being."

Mary has something in common with the Little Flower. One Good Friday evening more than 100 years ago, a young Carmelite nun known as Sister Thérèse of the Child Jesus of the Holy Face, more commonly known as Thérèse of Lisieux or the Little Flower, experienced the initial symptoms of what would eventually be diagnosed as terminal tuberculosis. While Thérèse trusted that God's abiding consolation would be with her throughout her illness, it was during the ensuing Easter season that Thérèse compared her actual experience of God to that of being "surrounded by a thick fog" (*The Story of a Soul*, Chapter 10).

Thérèse writes of these increasing feelings of darkness in these words: "During the most joyous days of Eastertide, Jesus made me feel that there truly are souls that don't have faith" (Chapter 10). She continues: "When I sing of the happiness of heaven, the everlasting possession of God, I feel no joy because of it, because I simply sing of what *I want to believe*" (Chapter 10). Thus, Thérèse found it difficult to sing a heartfelt Easter "Alleluia" in the spring of 1896.

Although Thérèse of Lisieux was born in 1873 and died 24 years later, her spiritual legacy lives on. She can serve as a valued spiritual guide for contemporary women and men seeking ways of authentically praying with the Easter mysteries.

Doctor's Advice

Thérèse Martin entered the Carmelite convent in Lisieux at the age of 15. Except for her book, *The Story of a Soul*, Thérèse might have died relatively unnoticed and unremembered, recalled only by her family members, friends and the Carmelite nuns who loved her.

Her spiritual legacy, however, led to her being canonized in 1925. In 1997, she was given the title "Doctor of the Church," sharing this honor with Saints Teresa of Avila and Catherine of Siena. These three women and 30 men have been recognized for their tremendous contributions to the life of the Church around the world and across the centuries.

Thérèse's spiritual legacy has been recognized on a global scale with a particular focus on her "Little Way," a spiritual path that can be accessed by people from all walks of life. Thérèse's own parents, Louis and Zélie, were beatified in Lisieux on October 19, 2008.

Given the varied movements of the Easter mysteries that can lead spiritual seekers to proclaim their own heartfelt "Alleluias," this article links four Easter quotes with excerpts from *The Story of a Soul* and stories from contemporary spiritual seekers. Questions for further prayer and reflection show how Thérèse of Lisieux can help us understand and live the Easter mysteries.

Experiencing Darkness Before Dawn

"Who will roll back the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" ask the women on their way to Jesus' tomb (Mark 16:3).

Before the "Alleluias" can be sung, we may need to spend reflective time before the dawn, patiently waiting for the first streaks of light to cross the morning sky. Time set aside for quiet prayer with the Easter Scriptures often enables us to notice our own questions, similar to the Gospel women's about moving stones and searching for Jesus among the dead.

James, a 54-year-old computer software engineer, feels he was betrayed by his brother-in-law. James recently made this connection with Mark 16:3: "How can I begin to move the stones that may be within me, particularly in places where I find it so hard to forgive

others like my brother-in-law, who turned his back on me in my time of need?

“In addition to my heartache over my brother-in-law, I experience other heavily burdened places within, for it’s not just one stone, but several of them that are weighing me down. I don’t even know how to begin to budge these heavy weights in myself. Can I really believe that my stone will be rolled back by God’s grace as a way for me to experience Easter joy?”

Interiorly burdened spiritual seekers like James may resonate with Thérèse’s experience of powerlessness: “In rich homes there are elevators that replace stairs to great advantage. I would also like to find an elevator to lift me up to Jesus, because I’m too little to climb the rough staircase of perfection. The elevator that must lift me up to heaven is Your arms, Jesus! For that I don’t need to become big. On the contrary, I have to stay little” (Chapter 10).

Reflection question. Perhaps we should ask ourselves: What do I desire of God as I stand in the darkness before the dawn, perhaps in a difficult situation in my own life at this time, or perhaps where I feel powerless in the face of heavy stones that seem to weigh me down? How might Thérèse of Lisieux accompany me here?

Clarity and Deepening Awareness

“He is not here, for he has been raised just as he said,” says the angel in Matthew 28:6.

Scripture shows that the disciples’ clarity and wonder at Jesus’ rising from the dead were far from instantaneous. Jesus’ followers gradually understood that he had fulfilled what he had promised about the third day. In light of this scriptural backdrop, a 50-year-old caregiver named Evelyn shared her significant anger and disappointment over all that had been required of her. Her mother’s sudden illness meant selling their Philadelphia home to pay for her mother’s financial and assisted-living needs.

By taking the risk of acknowledging to God her feelings of anger and disappointment, Evelyn has slowly come to recognize that God has indeed been present in everything that this loss has involved for herself and her mother. Evelyn prayed to stay open to her sense of God’s care and love.

While serving as a credible spiritual guide for a contemporary spiritual seeker like Evelyn, Thérèse provides a poignant example of having to grow up quickly as a result of a deeply felt experience of disappointment. It involves her beloved father after the Christmas Midnight Mass in 1886. In the Martin household, Christmas gifts were placed in the children’s shoes that were left by the fireplace. This yearly custom

still brought joy and delight to 13-year-old Thérèse. On this particular Christmas Eve, however, Thérèse overheard her father tell her older sister Céline with relief, “Well, fortunately this is the last year” (Chapter 5).

Thérèse immediately realized that, despite her keen disappointment in hearing the tone and finality in her father’s words, she likewise knew that “Jesus had changed her heart.” It was indeed time for her as a teenager to move on and grow beyond this treasured custom.

Reflection Question. We may want to ask ourselves: What do I desire of God as I search for clarity and peace of mind, perhaps regarding a changing or disappointing situation in my own life at this time? Could Thérèse of Lisieux be of any help here?

Joy and Surprise

“Then they went away quickly from the tomb, fearful yet overjoyed, and ran to announce this to his disciples” (Matthew 28:8).

Scripture shows us the momentum that builds when joy is truly experienced. This often takes place in the context of relationship, as someone feels drawn out of desolate solitude and fear into companionship by consolation and hope. Just as the women in the Scriptures left the place of burial and ran to report the wonder of all that they had seen and heard, so we too may be invited with joy-filled energy to tell others about where we have experienced the Lord.

Andrew, a 24-year-old college graduate, recently shared that when he had finally made a clear decision about his life’s path, he felt incredible relief and a sense of joy at taking steps that would lead him toward true happiness. Granted, it wasn’t the money-making career in business management that Andrew had originally envisioned. He realized, however, that being a high school teacher would bring him greater joy and fulfillment. Andrew allowed the momentum of this deep joy to take him forward on his path as a teacher.

Thérèse can effectively accompany contemporary seekers such as Andrew. She writes that when she finally told her father that she wanted to fulfill her lifelong dream, “Through my tears I confided in him my desire to enter Carmel. Then his tears began mingling with my own...[and] with Papa’s simple and upright nature, he was soon convinced that my desire was that of God Himself” (Chapter 5).

Thérèse entered Lisieux’s Carmelite monastery on April 9, 1888. “Finally my desires had been accomplished,” she wrote, “and my soul felt such sweet and such deep peace that it would be impossible for me to express it” (Chapter 7). Even through ensuing

hardships, trials and terminal illness, Thérèse would later acknowledge that the deep sense of inner peace and joy that she felt on that day had never abandoned her.

Reflection question. Our prayer could be strengthened by our asking: What do I desire of God as I name an experience of deep joy on the path of my life journey? What is it like to recall and savor that experience now? What might Thérèse of Lisieux contribute to my journey?

Spreading the Light

Regarding the women at the tomb on Easter morning, Matthew writes, “Then Jesus said to them, ‘Do not be afraid! Go tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me’” (28:10).

The Easter Scriptures always point spiritual seekers toward an active discipleship of sharing the Good News of the Risen Jesus. This invitation to Christian discipleship is limitless.

An 80-year-old homebound widow from New York, Jeanne, wonders about the effectiveness of her life now that her advanced stage of Parkinson’s disease has mostly confined her to her home.

Jeanne has always been an active member of her faith community, as well as various neighborhood organizations committed to service projects and good works. Reflecting on her memories of those good works, she says: “I used to be able to do such good work for God. Now that I’m in my home almost 24 hours a day, there isn’t much that I can do anymore. This makes me very sad.” *However, Jeanne has recently discovered a renewed sense of vocation while enjoying the friendship of her newly found spiritual guide, Thérèse of Lisieux.*

It may seem strange that Thérèse was named by the Catholic Church as patroness of missionaries, considering that she never left the Carmelite monastery after entering it at the age of 15. Thérèse’s fervor for the spiritual well-being of others, however, had begun in earnest well before her entrance into Carmel.

She prayed in 1887 for an outward sign of the conversion of a death-row criminal named Pranzini. When Thérèse found out that Pranzini had held a crucifix while kissing it three times immediately before his execution, she reports that she had truly obtained the sign of conversion for which she had prayed.

Years later at Carmel, Thérèse applied this same sort of zeal for others as she accepted a request to pray for a young seminarian, Maurice Bellière, who wrote that he had been inspired “to ask for a Sister who would devote herself especially to the salvation of his soul and help him through her prayers and sacrifices when he became

a missionary” (Chapter 11). Without hesitation, Thérèse agreed to pray for him and many other missionaries throughout the world.

Our Easter faith may grow deeper if we ask: What do I desire of God as I may feel called to spread the Good News of God’s light and love? What might it be like to accept God’s call to me at this time in my life? How might Thérèse of Lisieux show me the way?

Five Final Questions

As we continue to pray through the spiritual movements of the Easter season, we may want to ask ourselves:

- 1) Is there any particular reading from the Easter Scriptures or from the writings of Thérèse of Lisieux that particularly moves me? How? What do I notice?
- 2) Do the words and experiences of Thérèse reflect my own desires at this time?
- 3) How could Thérèse be my spiritual guide during this Easter season and beyond?
- 4) Just as Thérèse of Lisieux described her spiritual journey as her “Little Way,” how do I describe my spiritual path?
- 5) Is there a word, phrase or image that expresses the particular and personal grace(s) that I desire as I seek to live in the spirit of the Risen Christ?

We do not walk our Easter journey alone!

Have a blessed week,

