

There is a great difference between the appearances of the risen Lord and the kind of haunting which we suffer in the aftermath of a death. The experience of bereavement is powerful and, as I have known it, almost totally negative. Many great people have spoken of it, in every possible form: drama, poetry, stories, logical and psychological analysis, spiritual writing; and it is hardly ever possible to speak of bereavement positively.

The negative apprehension of mourning is fully present in the Gospels; the power of death to separate, to scatter people, symbolised in the dispersal of the company of Jesus friends: that terrible line from Mark's story of the garden: *and they all deserted him and ran away*. The single symbolic element in this undignified departure is the incident of the young man wearing a single linen sheet, who is grabbed by the police, and slips from his dress and runs away naked; his departure leaves him naked of dignity, naked of self-respect, and stripped of his relationship with the one who remains, in the grip of his captors.

One of the most acute forms of pain in the bereaved is the sharp remembrance of the departed: Jesus is of all the human family the one most remembered, and the one most worth remembering. His awesome life, the fulness of his goodness, the sheer beauty of his humanity beyond all others, leaves his mourners with the sick certainty that their pain will have no healing. If we have been wrong about someone, if we can come to learn that our swan was really a goose, there may be some merit in the notion that time will heal us, that the vacant space might be filled by others or by another. The loss of Jesus is not like that. Needing no help from theology or credal definition, those who had come to know Jesus must have known that his leaving them was an incurable disaster, that they were wounded for the rest of their lives. Even the police who were sent to apprehend him returned, incapable, with the words *there has never been anyone like him*. How much more the disciples, knowing him the healer and transformer and giver of human life, find themselves in a state of permanent devastation.

If you know what I mean about grief for someone truly lovable, you can afford to multiply it in the name of the Son of God, to a grief whose dimensions cannot be estimated, because his mourners have scarcely had time to understand that his living goodness was immeasurable. They must learn this, it seems, only in the terrible context of their loss. It is into this pit of grief that they find themselves staring on the *dies non*, the terrible Sabbath of the sealed tomb, when to this day we console ourselves with no sacraments.

Those who have been to this place will be enabled to understand exactly why the encounter with the risen Christ is so inexpressible: so that on this octave-day of Easter we are given Thomas to represent us: the one who grimly said, as Jesus announced his intention to return to Jerusalem: *Let us go too, and die with him*. Thomas now finds himself proved right, with this exception: that he finds Jesus dead, and himself unaccountably and detestably still alive. I feel convinced that this was the reason for his absence from the Upper Room, where they had listened to his last words to them, and sensed the awe and horror of his oncoming death.

Today is the feast of Thomas, and the feast of the meaning of the Christian Sabbath, where every Sunday is an Octave-day of the Easter celebration, and where generations of Thomases, wounded mortally by the grief of sin and death, can return, to find the believers gathered and the Lord returning, to show to them that he still bears the wounds that have seared the lives of his followers so deeply, and that he lives eternally in the fulness of the love of the Father. So don't let me hear the least echo of that insulting phrase, *Doubting Thomas*. Because even the Beloved Disciple concedes to Thomas the most glorious act of faith in the New Testament: *My Lord* (which they all called him) *and my God*.