

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

EASTER SUNDAY, YEAR B

Second Reading 1 Corinthians 5: 6–8

The backstory to this passage comes at the beginning of this same chapter. These preceding verses relate news of an incestuous relationship between a man and his stepmother, although the rest of the community seem not to disapprove of such a wicked deed. Indeed, Corinth, a wealthy shipbuilding centre, whose cosmopolitan population came from all parts of the Roman Empire, had a reputation for debauchery. Even in a world very tolerant of sexual excess, 'living like a Corinthian' was a euphemism for living a dissolute life.

The Jewish custom at that time was to destroy all leaven or yeast (Exodus 12: 15–18) for the Paschal festival, since only unleavened bread was allowed.



Paul then equates the old yeast with the sins of the incestuous man. Even a small amount of yeast can affect a whole batch of bread, or in this case a whole

community, as had happened in Corinth. It is to be discarded.

Paul urges repentance – that is, turning away from wicked ways and turning towards God. To repent is to reject past behaviour; to experience a change of heart and mind.

The unleavened bread made with a new dough then comes to represent the virtuous, sincere and truthful Christian.

Paul uses the image of yeast here as an example of the corrupting influence of evil, although in the Gospels yeast is used as a symbol of dynamism, and a contributory factor to the coming of the Kingdom (e.g. Luke 13: 20–22),

Gospel John 20: 1–9

No evangelist describes the actual resurrection, yet it is at the core of our Christian faith. There are slight differences between the accounts of the different gospel writers but John gives the fullest description of events around the resurrection; he has a keen eye for detail.

It was very early in the morning and still dark

The time of day is significant. Throughout John's gospel we find this contrast between light and darkness. The gloom echoes the way Mary feels at the death of her friend Jesus. It could also reflect her lack of understanding of the events which have taken place.

'They have taken the Lord'

Mary assumes that the body has been stolen. Grave robbing was a common crime at the time; indeed, Rome had issued an imperial edict against it. Finding an empty tomb was an important factor to prove the resurrection of Jesus to sceptic Jews who would easily dismiss accounts of appearances to the disciples as collective hysteria.

'We don't know ...'

Although only Mary Magdala is mentioned by name here, she was not alone at the tomb. The other evangelists mention several women by name: Mary, the mother of James, Salome, Joanna.

Mary is a key witness at the death and resurrection of Jesus. John, always respectful of women— as for example his account of the Samaritan woman at the well or Martha, Lazarus' sister— gives her a prominent part. The testimony of a woman could easily have been dismissed. However, the testimony of two men was needed in a Jewish court of law to verify an event.

Peter and the 'beloved' disciple

Tradition once maintained that the anonymous 'Beloved Disciple' of St John's Gospel was John, son of Zebedee. However, most scholars now agree that this individual was in fact more than simply a historical person in the life of Jesus. Instead, the Beloved Disciple may be seen as symbolising the role that every faithful disciple, including ourselves, can play in the life of the Church. Here this disciple reacts slightly differently from the impulsive Peter who goes straight into the tomb: it is the Beloved Disciple who actually gets there first, and who first believes in the resurrection of Jesus.

Peter bent down into the tomb

Despite the way in which artists over the centuries have depicted the empty tomb, archaeological research shows that a 3-foot tall entrance led into cave-like tombs at the time.

The linen cloths

John gives a very specific account of the position and state of the linen cloths. The carefully folded linens attest to the fact that the body has not been stolen or spirited away.