



NOLI ME TANGERE

Easter 2020

APRIL FOOL

Earlier in April, a newsflash appeared on my mobile:

Breaking! In response to corona virus, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Pope have met via Zoom, and agreed to delay Easter. The article went on in great detail to describe how Lent would be extended, Easter celebrated in May, and how this would affect the rest of the Church calendar. And then I saw the date – 1st April – it was an April fool!

Up to that point it had all been very convincing and for a moment I'd been taken in. After all, it feels like we're living through an extended Lent. If everything else has been cancelled or delayed why not Easter too?

But Easter cannot be cancelled or delayed.

The joyous resurgence of life and love that is the Resurrection happens in the face of disaster. This is the joy that God brings us even in the middle of a pandemic. Christ is Risen, and though the suffering of the Cross is real and cannot be forgotten, yet he comes to us in our tears as he comes to a weeping Mary Magdalene. Easter is the transformation of tragedy that gives us hope.

NOLI ME TANGERE

Through Holy Week, I have been using the paintings of El Greco to guide us in our reflections, and today I bring you another. I'm slightly cheating here, because this one isn't by El Greco himself, but by his workshop and commonly attributed his son. Once again I ask the same question – What do you see?

What I see most of all, is the gaze of affection between Mary and Christ. If you follow the movement of your eyes round the image, you'll notice first you are drawn to the face of the Magdalene, illuminated not so much by the dawn in the sky behind her, as by the face of Christ before her. and then your eyes are led across to the face of Christ looking back at her,

and from there down the handle of gardener's hoe,
and up the sleeve of Mary's robe to her face once more.

In this movement of the eye,
we are caught up in the gaze between them,
This is the moment when Christ calls her by her name,
and Mary recognises the Risen Lord.
Like two lovers staring into each other's eyes,
There is a moment of absolute stillness,
When nothing else happens and nothing else matters.

Now look at the gap between them -
a space charged with love and joy.
If the tomb is the most important empty space in the Gospels,
Then this, surely, is the second -
the space between the Risen Lord and Mary Magdalene as he says to her
'Touch me not'.
or 'Do not hold on to me'
Those most enigmatic words,
pondered by Christians through the centuries.
They tell us that Jesus still has work to do -
he must ascend and complete the work of redemption
by ascending to the Father.
and Mary still has work to do.
She must share the Good News of the Resurrection with others.
This year, there is also work for us to do before we can fully celebrate Easter
joy.
It is the work of caring for the sick and keeping ourselves and others out of
harm's way by reducing our contact - but there is still a message of joy to share
with a world that is frightened, grieving and lonely.

But it's hard - very hard.
Normally, we express our affection through the medium of touch.
We kiss the people we love.
Shake hands with colleagues.
Hug children,
Hold the hands of the sick and the dying,
And put our arms around the grieving.
What's so hard at the moment is **not** doing these things,

which come so naturally,
and which are so **right** most of the time.
It goes against every human instinct.

Touch is at the centre of our human experience as embodied beings –
and not touching seems to take away from who we are.
In the Gospels Jesus almost always touches the untouchable to show that they
are loved and valued by God.

The other day I was walking down the street and a woman wearing a face-mask
turned her back to me as I passed even though I was more than two metres
away. For a moment I was offended, no more than that, really hurt, because I
was responding as if things were normal, but in fact, her turning away, came
from a desire to protect herself – and me – from harm – at a time when things
are far from normal.

Now, for a time we are learning to love in a new and different way.

Right now, not touching and not being close to people,

Is a sign of **love**.

‘Touch me not’ says the Lord to Mary Magdalene.

Mysterious words which this year have a very concrete and specific meaning.

Like the space between Our Lord and Mary –

let that gap between us and be charged with a love.

WE’LL MEET AGAIN

In her broadcast to the nation last week,
the Queen appeared to quote a Vera Lynn song when she said ‘We’ll meet
again’.

The lyrics continue:

‘Don’t know where/Don’t know when/but I know we’ll meet again’.

But they also brought to mind verses from earlier in John’s Gospel

When Jesus predicts his passion

and talks to his disciples of going away from them, and he says:

‘A little while and you will no longer see me, and again a little while and you will
see me’.

Then he goes on to anticipate the Resurrection when he says:

‘Your pain will be turned into joy ... I will see you again and your hearts will
rejoice, and one will take your joy from you’.

This scene we have heard today with Mary Magdalene is the fulfilment of those words.

Here Mary turns not once but twice.

First she looks but does not see.

Then she turns again,
and sees and understands.

This is the Lord she thought she had lost but has now found again,
She turns, away from darkness to light, from grief to joy, death to life.

We celebrate Easter today, even in the middle of a pandemic,
because it cannot be delayed or cancelled.

The Cross is still a reality it will never be erased,
but Easter is the transformation of tragedy
when suffering becomes the place of hope.

It comes to us in the midst of tears and grief as it did to Mary Magdalene all
those years ago on the first Easter morning.

So Easter is here to stay, but in those words 'touch me not' we see that there is
still work for us all to do,

so that the fullness of Easter joy may be experienced by everyone –
on that day when we can once again kiss and hug, and hold and touch
our loved ones, our family, friends and neighbours.

Easter has already come

And the fullness of Resurrection joy will also come
even if it comes late this year.

Fr Stephen 12 April 2020