



2024 Easter Message of His Eminence, Peter Ebere Cardinal Okpaleke to the Faithful of the Catholic Diocese of Ekwulobia and to People of Good will.

“THEY DID NOT FIND THE BODY OF THE LORD [IN THE TOMB]”
(Lk 24:3)

Dear brothers and Sisters in Christ,

It is with joy that I wish you a happy Easter! Let us sing with joy: *alleluia, o binigo, Jesu ebinigo, Jesu a kpodoro n'enu obe, onye mmeri* (Alleluia, he has risen, Jesus who was crucified is risen, the victorious one!).

The resurrection is the foundation of our faith as Christians. As St. Paul put it, if Jesus did not rise from the dead, our faith would have been in vain (1 Cor 15:17). But he rose again. The tomb could not keep the author of life. In Jesus, death and life fought a battle. For a while, a very short while, it seemed that death had the final word. It was as if human wickedness and evil machination triumphed; that the light of love was extinguished. But then, suddenly, through the power of God, love was vindicated, life defeated death. Better still, life came through death, light dispelled darkness. Everything changed. This is why Easter has remained a source of hope, hope anchored in God's power and disposition to bring life out of death and light out of darkness. This is the hope projected to us by the empty tomb of Jesus that if we follow in Jesus' footsteps, we shall rise with him (2 Tim 2:11). As we celebrate our Lord's resurrection, let us remember the pledge of our resurrection which we already had in the sacrament of baptism (Rom 6:5f).

In Nigeria today, hope is a scarce commodity. The most basic form of hope is the belief that tomorrow will be better. But presently, such hope, usually articulated in Pidgin English as “*e go better!*” (it will be better), often elicits a taunt “*na poor man's prayer*” (it is the prayer of a poor person). But is this a matching response to that expression? I do not think so. A practical response to the question of the future in the situation of Nigeria today is the *japa* syndrome. This is a statement made in practice that “*e go better anywhere but no be for Naija*” (a bright future is foreseeable anywhere except in Nigeria). People, especially the young, are therefore doing anything and everything just to leave the shores of Nigeria. This is the sad reality we find ourselves in. Worse still is that hunger has given a dangerous turn to hopelessness. Many families, especially those of salary earners, can no longer afford food. The purchasing power of their earning has been reduced drastically by inflation which has also driven up the prices of food and other essentials.

In the light of the above, the empty tomb of Jesus directed my thought to agriculture. The tomb was empty not because the body had been stolen or annihilated. Rather, the body taken up when the Word took flesh in the Blessed Virgin Mary (Gal 4:4) was transformed into a glorious body that could enter a room despite closed doors and windows. This glorious body however retained

its link with the crucified body so much so that Thomas was invited to insert his hands in the nail wounds on the Lord's hands. The empty tomb and the Easter mystery stand for this singular action of the Father on behalf of His Son that resulted in the crucified, passing through death and coming back to life in a glorified body.

Cultivating yam, planting any seed, throws a dim light on the manner of the resurrection. Certainly, it does not explain it. This analogy between the mystery of Easter and agriculture was first made by St. Paul himself. He wrote: "someone may ask: how are the dead people raised, and what sort of body do they have when they come?" He responded: "what you sow must die before it is given new life; and what you sow is not the body that is to be, but only a bare grain, of wheat...it is God who gives it the sort of body that he has chosen for it, and for each kind of seed its own kind of body" (1 Cor 15:35-38). A grain of wheat sown dies, and by God's power, it is transformed; it is multiplied and yields a rich harvest. This provides an analogy to the Easter mystery. Sadly, because we observe this phenomenal transformation in nature on a daily basis, we no longer take any notice. Many people have lost sight of the profundity of the mystery of divine involvement therein and how closely it models the Easter mystery. I want us to contemplate this everyday mystery, reinsert ourselves into it, and re-enact it with our hands.

As we rejoice at Jesus' triumph over sin and death in obedience to the Father, let me invite you to use this period which providentially is at the return of the rains and the beginning of the planting season, to participate in the analogous mystery of death and transformation that takes place in the farm. Cultivate something. Sow something, even if in bags, so that God may transform and multiply it for human sustenance. Be generous with leasing out any piece of arable land to someone who wants to cultivate it and re-enact the mystery of God's transformative act in nature of bringing life out of death. Consider supplying seedlings and not only foodstuff to your loved ones to enable them experience once again this mystery. As we do this, may we continue to pray that we may rediscover the power of God active in creation and open ourselves to it. This is a power that can transform and inspire love, curb selfishness and bitterness, defeat the darkness of sin and indifference and make us more like Christ who, in obedience to the Father, endured the cross to break the vicious cycle of violence and show that love is stronger than death (Song of Solomon 8:9). It is a power which working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine (Eph 3:20). Abandon yourself unto this loving power and open yourself to receive the new breath of life and hope. As you do this, yours will become an empty tomb since the old will be gone and you will walk in newness of life with Christ (2 Cor 5:17, Rom 6:4).

May God bless you as you experience the transformative power of God in nature and in yourself and may the grace of the risen Lord be with you!

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