

Saturday, March 31, 2018

Great Vigil of Easter

Genesis 7.1-5, 11-18, 8.6-8, 9.8-17; Exodus 14.10-31, 15.20-21;

Ezekiel 37.1-14; Romans 6.3-11; Mark 16.1-8

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“This is the night!” As we heard in the Exsultet, “This is the night, when [God] brought . . . the children of Israel, out of bondage in Egypt, and led them through the Red Sea . . . This is the night, when [we] are delivered from . . . sin, and are restored to grace and holiness of life. This is the night, when Christ broke the bonds of death and hell, and rose victorious from the grave.” Just as this is the night when our Jewish sisters and brothers celebrate Passover, this is the night we celebrate our Passover.

The fourth-century Bishop Ambrose described this annual celebration of our Passover, of the Resurrection, as the “crossing-over.” For the celebration of the great Three Days is precisely that—a crossing over. The time we cross over from the cross to the empty tomb; from darkness to light; from the flood to God’s promise of “never again”; from slavery to liberation; from dead bones to a living vast multitude; from sin to salvation; from death to life.

Tonight we stand in the place of crossing over. In the Vigil – in the waiting in hopeful anticipation for the promise of the Resurrection – we find ourselves in one of those mysterious “thin places” where time seems to collapse in on itself. Where we stand at once in the past, in the present, and in the future. And at the center is the empty tomb.

In our Gospel reading we heard how three women went to the tomb on the third day after Jesus’ death, where they find the tomb empty. Jesus had repeatedly told them that he would die and be resurrected. But the empty tomb in itself does not provide proof of the Resurrection. Conclusive proof is provided by the young man dressed in a white robe who tells the women “He has been raised” (Mk 16.6).

This single event is the culmination of salvation history. Where the reality of Christ’s Resurrection provides depth of meaning to the great stories of our history. Where those stories add depth of meaning to the mystery that is the Resurrection. Each of our Vigil readings tonight are stories of crossing over from death to life. Each anticipating the ultimate crossing over achieved through Christ’s Resurrection. And each story reframed in light of that glorious event.

In the story of the Flood, we heard how the Ark, built by Noah, provided safety for a chosen remnant of humanity and representative animals from a great flood intended to wipe out the evil that permeated the Earth. The Ark that spared its inhabitants from death and carried them to new life.

The church is sometimes likened to an ark. Have you ever noticed the construction of most church buildings? They are shaped like upside down boats. An appropriate image, as we are – or should be – a place of safety from the ills of the world. It is from the safety of the “ark” – the church – that we are sent out into the world to proclaim a better way. And just as the waters buoyed the Ark, the waters of baptism buoy us in our life’s journey. And placed in the light of

Easter, it is through the Resurrection of Jesus Christ that the world has been saved from destruction.

In the story of Israel's deliverance at the Red Sea, we heard how the children of Israel were allowed to pass safely through the Red Sea, and once they were safely through, how the waters came crashing in on the Egyptian soldiers who were pursuing them. We heard how through this event, the children of Israel were liberated from slavery, allowing them to begin their journey to the Promised Land.

Just as the children of Israel came through the waters of the Red Sea to a new life, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we see ourselves as brought through the waters of baptism, saved from the enemy that is death, and given new life. Ours is a journey to a new promised land with Christ as our guide and protector.

In the story of the valley of dry bones, we heard how God commanded the Prophet Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones and how those bones came together, reassembled into bodies. How, through the breath of God, the Spirit of God, these reassembled bodies were given new life. This prophecy was a metaphor for the new life that God would give the people of Israel who were in exile. How God would reassemble them into a body, into his people, for their return home. For their return to a new life.

Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we see in these reassembled bones a promise about the baptized life, giving each of us new life. And bringing us together as the Body of Christ. Given new life by the breath of God, the imparting of the Holy Spirit, to energize and enliven us. And in this imagery of the bones we receive a hint of the final resurrection of the dead promised to us at the end of the ages.

Each of these stories, reframed in the light of the Resurrection, say something about our life of faith. Our life as the Body of the Resurrected Christ. They are stories of our past, moving us into the present, to the opening of the empty tomb. But there is another critical aspect of this crossing over. Where do we go from the empty tomb?

Mark's version of the Resurrection story has an abrupt ending. "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (Mk 16.8). This is where Mark's account originally ended. Since the time these words were written, this abrupt ending to the Gospel of Mark has continued to puzzle, challenge, even frustrate readers. Instead of a neat and satisfying ending, we are left with more questions. To counter that, both shorter and longer endings have been added in an attempt to answer these hanging questions. But we cannot ignore how the original story ends. With the women fleeing from the empty tomb in terror and amazement. Leaving us with unanswered questions.

Paul, in his letter to the Romans, provides his own corrective, of sorts. He provides an explanation as to how we participate in Christ's death and resurrection through our own baptisms. "Therefore we have been buried with him in baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of

life” (Rom 6.4). The death and resurrection of Christ is not just some past historical events, but is a present reality for those who believe. “So [we] also must consider [ourselves] dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Rom 6.11).

Mark’s abrupt ending is likely intended to move us into the future. To invite us to solve the mystery for ourselves. To encouraging us to act in faithful ways so that we might succeed where the women and disciples did not. It is intended to issue a challenge to the reader. “The fact of the empty tomb itself does not provide conclusive proof of the Resurrection. We are called to discover for ourselves that the Lord is risen by observing the effects of the Resurrection in our own lives” (Synthesis, April 1, 2018). With this challenge and Paul’s assurance, we are not to run away from the empty tomb in terror and amazement, telling no one. Rather, we are to continue the work of our Risen Lord, taking the message of his Resurrection, as manifest in our own lives of faith, to Galilee and all the world. Where we boldly proclaim:

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

(The Lord is Risen indeed! Alleluia!)