

Saturday, April 16, 2022
Great Vigil of Easter (Year C)
Luke 24.1-12

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher
Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1065204197367172>

(Sermon begins at about 1:07:20)

“Why Do You Look for the Living Among the Dead?”

“Why do you look for the living among the dead?” These are the words that the angels spoke to the women at the tomb. Maybe I’m being a little too literal, but the women were not looking for the living. They were looking for a dead body. Jesus’ dead body. To prepare it according to their burial customs. But, as we see, this was really the angels’ way of reminding the women of what Jesus had told them before they even came to Jerusalem. That after he was crucified, he would rise again on the third day. That new life can—and in this case, does—come out of death. And, of course, the angels do then confirm for the women that Jesus has risen.

New life coming out of death—be it literal, physical death or metaphorical death—is the theme of the day. It is what the Great Vigil of Easter is about. Every element of this service points to the divine reversal that death is not the end, but rather is an opportunity for a new beginning. From the very beginning, with our lighting of the Paschal Candle, representing the Risen Christ coming into the world, the light of life, of new life, dispelling the darkness of death. We then followed this light of the Risen Christ into the darkened church. Which, since Good Friday, has been devoid of the sacramental presence of Christ. The darkened church representing the tomb, a symbol for death. Here again, the light of Christ shining in the darkness, allowing us to see, for the first time, the signs of new life—the church decorated in all its Easter splendor, with symbols of new life.

During the course of the Vigil, through readings, Psalms, and prayers, we hear of key stories of salvation history. “The record of God’s saving deeds in history, how he saved his people in ages past,” showing us that God is still active in the world, continually bringing new life out of death, be it literal or figurative.

The story of Noah and the flood. How even in the midst of the destruction of the world, God chose a faithful remnant of eight people and two of every other kind of living creature to repopulate the world. To bring new life to a world that had become figuratively dead through sinfulness and corruption, and then literally dead through the destructive waters of the flood.

The story of the deliverance of the Hebrews at the Red Sea. How God, working through Moses, delivered his people from the soul-crushing bonds of slavery—a form of metaphorical death if there ever was one. Leading them through the Red Sea to a new life of freedom and opportunity. The Red Sea itself bringing death to the Egyptian oppressors, while at the same time, being the passage to new life for the Hebrews.

And the vision of the valley of dry bones. The valley strewn with the desiccated remains of Israel following the invasion and conquest by the Babylonians. The literal death of so many, and a form of metaphorical death for those who remained alive but who were carried away into captivity. A life—if you could call it that—in a foreign place, away from the land and the culture that gave the people their identity. But more importantly, away from the Temple. Away from the God who gave the people life. Without access to their land and their God, Israel was effectively dead as a nation and as a people. But then, the prophet Ezekiel has a vision prophesying the end of captivity in Babylon and the return of God’s people to Israel. Resulting in new life for the people, just as new life was breathed into the dry bones.

Following the Vigil readings, we moved to what is THE central act of the Easter Vigil and of our faith—Baptism. The sacrament that is the iconic symbol, the definitive act, of bringing new life out of death. The bringing together of all the elements of this night. Our participation in salvation history, particularly in the stories of coming through the waters of the Flood and the Red Sea into new life. And the ultimate act of salvation history thus far, Christ’s death and resurrection. The overarching images and themes of death and rebirth that accompany Baptism. As our Catechism tells us, “The inward and spiritual grace in Baptism is union with Christ in his death and resurrection, birth into God’s family, forgiveness of sins, and new life in the Holy Spirit” (BCP, p. 858). All the benefits of Baptism being about new life. A new life in Christ, as a member of the Body of Christ. New life now, and the promise of new and eternal life in the age to come.

Of course, the outward and visible signs of Baptism being filled with imagery of death and new life. In ancient times, people were baptized by being completely immersed in water. A visible representation of death. Of dying to self and one’s old way of life. And then, rising out of the water, born anew. A new creation. A reminder of the death and new life that occurred through the Flood. A reminder of the death and new life that occurred at the Red Sea. All this symbolism being a reminder of Christ’s death, his being buried in the tomb, and then rising to new life. All this pointing to what Easter is about. And hence, why historically the Easter Vigil was the day designated for performing Baptisms. Today, at least in the Episcopal Church, we generally do not do Baptism by full immersion. But the symbolism of the water being poured over the head of the baptismal candidate is meant to call to mind all these images we have witnessed this night.

Tonight, the death and new life of Baptism was made real in our midst. Not just a remembrance of our own baptismal vows—although we did that, as well. But tonight, we were blessed to be able to witness new life proceeding from death as we baptized Fred Cornett. As Fred went into the waters of baptism. While there, experiencing death. The death of who he had been before. And rising out of the water, Fred rose to new life. Just as our Lord rose to new life on Easter. Fred came out of those waters a new man. Washed clean of his sins. Risen to new life as a member of the Body of Christ. Reborn into eternal life with God and with Christ. And with all of us, his sisters and brothers in Christ.

As we celebrate this Great Vigil of Easter, as we celebrate with Fred and welcome him into the household of faith, there is one other component of our Vigil celebration that recalls new life coming out of death. The Eucharist. Our memorial of the Last Supper. Calling to mind Jesus’ last

meal with his disciples before his own death and resurrection. But even more so, symbolizing the heavenly banquet at the end of the ages. That time after these earthly bodies are dead and gone, when we are all born into new and eternal life, gathered around the banquet table in the heavenly realm, in the presence of God and Christ, celebrating God's love for us. A love so deep, so profound, that God, through his Son, experienced the ultimate sacrifice—his own death—so as to bring about the defeat of sin and death once and for all. So as to bring all of us into new life in him and with him.

As the angels asked the women at the tomb, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" Because it is out of death that new life comes. And we, my brothers and sisters in Christ, are living proof.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!