

Saturday, April 8, 2023

Great Vigil of Easter

Romans 6.3-11; Matthew 28.1-10

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/5717995501640482>

(Sermon begins at about 35:45)

“Defining Moments”

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!

When we look back on our lives, what will we most remember? Certainly we will remember moments of particular joy: graduating from high school or college, getting married, the birth of a child or grandchild, the purchase of your first home, taking a particularly memorable trip. The list of possibilities goes on and on, and is, obviously, unique to the individual. As we look at such moments, more often than not, what these events have in common is that they are defining moments in our lives. In some way or another, many if not all of these remembered moments helped to shape and form who we are. That there was a fundamental change in who we are as a result of those moments. When it comes to the ordination of a person to Holy Orders, one of the things you sometimes hear is that ordination results in what is called an “ontological change.” While the same person physically, there is a complete change in being, in who they are. I would argue that the same concept applies to many of the memorable, life-changing events we experience in our lives. Maybe not all, but certainly the more significant ones. For example, in the act of marriage, one changes from being a single, independent person to being a spouse, legally and spiritually bound to another, with a whole new role, new responsibilities, and a new identity. You get the idea.

What we experience during the Great Vigil of Easter is something similar. We look at key events in what we refer to as “salvation history.” We look back on our religious history, on how we, as a people of faith, came to be who we are today. While there are many to choose from, I like to focus on the stories we heard this evening because they are particularly dramatic, particularly defining stories, for who we are as people of faith.

We started with the story of Noah and the Flood, occurring at a time before any formalized religion or worship practices were established. The early days in humanity’s relationship with God. The description of an event necessitated by rampant evils among humanity, prompting God to seek a reboot of the human experiment. To wipe out all creation except for a faithful remnant and to start all over, with the hopes of getting us back on the right track. Certainly, a defining event in the history of humanity. One so profound that every culture and every religion has a story of a great flood. An event that is even verified by geological evidence.

We moved on to the story of Israel’s deliverance at the Red Sea. The single most important event in the history of the Jewish people. In their deliverance at the Red Sea, the Hebrews who had been enslaved in Egypt are now free to chart their own course. Or rather, to follow the

path set out for them by their God. Leading to the subsequent forty-year wilderness experience as they journeyed back to the Promised Land. A time of significant formation as the Hebrews become reacquainted with their God, as they are shaped into God's Chosen People, as their social and religious identity is molded by the laws and religious practices God provides for them. All of which is the beginning of the development of the Jewish faith. The religious tradition of Jesus and his disciples. The religious tradition that forms the foundation for our own Christian tradition.

We then moved to the story of the Valley of Dry Bones. A prophetic vision God provides to Ezekiel at a time when the nation of Israel has long been decimated by the Assyrians and the nation of Judah has been taken into exile by the Babylonians. The remnant remaining in Judah is a pale shadow of its former self. Little more than so many dried and lifeless bones strewn around a battlefield. A time when Jewish culture and religious practices seem to be as dead as those bones. And yet, God provides a vision of the bones being reassembled into bodies and life being breathed back into the people. Which does come to pass, as God's people are again liberated and return from exile to reestablish their homeland, their culture, and their religion. In the process, redefining who they are as God's people.

These are all defining event in the collective life and identity of our Jewish forebearers. As such, these are all defining events in our collective life and identity as Christians. And then comes what is our single most important and defining event in our life and identity as followers of Christ. His resurrection. The glorious event we celebrate this night. We heard how Mary Magdalene and her companion went to the tomb following the sabbath to pay their respects and say good-bye to their beloved teacher. I'm sure on that walk to the tomb, they must have felt that the crucifixion of Jesus was a defining moment for them. Their lives were forever changed. Their beloved friend and leader is gone. Dead. Now rotting in a tomb. Their heads were probably swimming, trying to figure out what all this meant for them. After all, they had given up their previous lives and devoted the last three years of their lives to Jesus. For these three years, their whole identity was shaped by him. What would they do now that he is gone? Who would they be without him?

Upon arriving at the tomb, the women are greeted by an angel: "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said." Before they can even wrap their heads around the possibilities, they encounter the Risen Lord himself. Talk about a defining moment in their lives. Their identity has been restored. Or rather, changed yet again. Before, they followed an itinerant teacher who had some interesting things to say. But now, they are witnesses to the resurrection. The single most extraordinary event in the history of humanity. They now have a new identity as those charged with proclaiming the resurrection—to go out and share the good news of this life-changing event with the world. Although, in the moment, they probably couldn't even comprehend the magnitude of what this would mean for them and for humanity. The gift of salvation. The promise of new and eternal life. Just for starters.

The witnessing of the resurrection, the first encounter with the Risen Christ, changed the lives of those two women. And the lives of the other disciples and all whom they shared this with were similarly changed. And in turn, their witness leading to a new identity for all of us who

have followed in the life of faith, on down through the last two millennia. Bringing us to this moment in this place.

Central to our celebration this night is not just a telling of the stories of salvation history. What is truly central is the act, the process, of making these stories our own. Which, in our Christian tradition, is primarily done through the sacrament of baptism. Or as we did tonight, the remembrance of our baptisms through the renewal of our baptismal covenant. The action whereby we as individuals are changed. Whereby we as individuals are given a new identity as members of the Body of Christ. Whereby we are incorporated into the family of Christ. An action that, by its very nature, we consider to be an ontological change. As Paul says in his Letter to the Romans, "Therefore we have been buried with him by 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. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." A definition of ontological change if there ever was one.

Paul then goes on to describe the results of this change, the new identity that we obtain: "if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." An event, a process, that is arguably the most significant defining moment in all of history. Providing each and every one of us with a significant defining moment in our own lives: our baptism. Providing each and every one of us with the most important identity we can possibly bear: members of the Body of the Risen Christ.

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The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!