

Sermon, Easter Vigil, Year A, 2011

Acts 10:34-43

Colossians 3:1-4

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

Matthew 28:1-10

Bill Watson

Imagine it is late on Friday afternoon. People are busy making final preparations. As dusk approaches, the shops, restaurants, and businesses close. Cars are parked. Work has stopped because the Sabbath has begun. The faithful put on their formal dress and walk to synagogue. The next day their rest continues, the shops and stores remain closed. Worship continues. It is not until Sunday morning that life returns to what we might call normal. Work begins again.

That is the scene relived each week in a predominantly Orthodox Jewish neighborhood in Los Angeles where my son lives. There, the ancient customs of the Jewish faith continue to be observed.

Such customs have marked the Jewish community for generations. So following Jesus' hasty burial late Friday afternoon, Sunday morning was the first opportunity to complete the burial customs. On the first day of the week, the faithful women, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary are following the tradition of their faith. They have waited until the Sabbath is over and now they are returning to perform the rituals of burial.

These women like the rest of the faithful band of disciples and followers were stricken with grief. The world as they knew it, as they hoped it had become, had come to an end or so they thought. Yet, these women did not stay home in grief. Instead they followed their tradition, their custom and together they headed for the tomb.

And there was great reward for their faithfulness. They are the first to encounter the empty tomb, the news of resurrection and to encounter the risen Lord.

Wm. Barclay in his commentary on Matthew's gospel says, "Three imperatives seem to spring forth." First the women are urged to believe. The angel says, "He has been raised as he said."

Secondly, they are urged to share. Go tell the disciples. Share the good news with others. This news is greater than all other news. This news changes everything.

Third, they are urged to rejoice. That is literally the meaning of the Greek word when Jesus says, "Greetings." Jesus really says rejoice.

Early on that first day of the week, the women went in the community of one another. That is the nature of the church, Christians gathered in community. We too follow such ancient traditions. At times of loss, grief, and tragedy we too gather together in community. We gather together to support one another and to share such difficult times. We gather to express our love for one another.

The resurrection appearances almost without exception occur in community. Where two or three are gathered together, Jesus is there. Yet, resurrection still feels surreal if not unreal, impossible, and unbelievable.

The theologian Karl Barth once wrote, resurrection is “a difficult dark truth and a word that can scarcely be tolerated by our ears.” Barth insisted that “we are threatened by resurrection.” We are threatened because we are imprisoned in our world of sin and death and we are incapable of helping ourselves. This is a truth that we have great difficulty facing. Barth went on to dare us, “Admit it,” he said. “There is no way out of this life with its thousand festering needs. Nothing except the possibility of a miracle can help us. Resentful of this infringement on our self-sufficiency and reluctant to rely on anyone else, even God, we are threatened by the need that the very idea of resurrection raises.” (*Come Holy Spirit: Sermons*, Kessinger Publishing, 2008). Despite our pride, resurrection is truly what we need. Resurrection affirms that our sense of self-sufficiency is merely self-deception. Ultimately our lives are dependent upon God.

Something about this day changed everything! Lives were changed and the Christian church came into being.

Vigil: Like Mary Magdalene and the other Mary we too are following tradition. We are following tradition and gathering early in the morning of the first day of the week. This custom of the church dates to the earliest years in the life of the church.

The early church would retell the stories of faith. They would begin with the story of creation. The story of God who creates all that surrounds us through the gift of his creative love and energy. Then they would retell the central story of Hebrew identity, the deliverance of the Hebrew people from the Egyptians at the Red Sea. The story of God who hears the cries of his people and comes down to bring freedom from captivity and to lead his beloved people to the Promise Land.

This was the service where the church’s ancient initiation rites were exercised. Converts to the faith were baptized. Notorious sinners were forgiven and returned to the Eucharistic community of the church. This is the day of renewal and conversion. And like generations of faithful Christians before us we too have come here.

We have come to enact the primary sacrament of new birth. To baptize as the church has done since its earliest days. Today, baptism has incorporated two new members of the household of God, new members of the communion of the church. This morning Ian Josiah Lukanich and Laura Elizabeth Sackett became the newest members of the body of Christ.

We have come early today to rediscover once again that the tomb is empty. Death cannot hold sway over our Lord and Savior.

Now having celebrated our rebirth once again, we will gather as we do week after week to be fed at God’s holy table. You and I will come to this table to receive who we are, the body and blood of Christ. Then having been nurtured on Christ, we are sent forth. We are sent forth to be Christ’s hands of love in the world. We are sent forth to share the incredible good news of resurrection! God’s great creative love has overcome death once and for all.

The resurrection of Jesus changes everything, absolutely everything. Resurrection also changes every one of us as well! And we like faithful generations before us are forever connected with God, through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus. The Apostle Paul stated our belief clearly, “If we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.” This is the joyful good news that we have come today to celebrate.

There is no better news than this. We have waited so long I ask you to join me again in the Easter acclamation:

“Alleluia, Christ is risen!”

“The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!”