

The Great Vigil of Easter

March 25, 2016

All Saints Cathedral, Milwaukee WI

The Rev. Ian C. Burch

Alleluia. Christ is Risen!

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My brothers and sisters in Christ, welcome on this most holy of nights to the Empty Tomb of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We sat in darkness and listened to the great stories of God's saving acts—the Creation, the Flood, the Exodus from Egypt, the renewal of Israel spoken through the prophet Ezekiel. And now the lights are up, the stone is rolled away, and instead of a body, lying on a bier for three days, we see that Jesus, Son of Man and friend of Mary Magdalene, has been raised from the dead.

We expected to meet a corpse tonight, and instead we met divine beings whose clothes dazzled like fire. These messengers told us, just as they told those faithful, holy women, that Jesus has been raised, just as Jesus said. And the men with dazzling clothes gently rebuke us, asking, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?”

The Vigil in which we participate tonight is among the oldest that exists in the Christian church. It is more mythic, more primal than the Easter morning celebrations we're accustomed to—with the white gloves and bonnets, spring flowers and candy and that ubiquitous rabbit. Tonight digs deep into the soul, into the part that is difficult to let loose in our buttoned up, modern life. Fire at the dawn of creation; water for the Flood and for our Baptisms; light of life and darkness of death. This rite attempts to take us out of our sophisticated selves—maybe even invites us to worship God in a way that would make sense to those earliest Christians—our brothers and sisters across time.

Our spiritual ancestors understood time in a way we would find baffling. Imagine a world without clocks beeping at you to say “Wake up” or “the coffee’s done” or “you have a meeting 15 minutes away that begins in 10.” (We have done our best to master time, with varying degrees of success, but this wasn’t always the case.) The early less-timebound followers of Jesus understood that God’s savings acts weren’t in some distant, irrelevant past—salvation, by its nature, exists profoundly as past, present and future. You can’t set your clock by it or program it into your phone.

The Hebrews were saved from Pharaoh in the past, are being saved from Pharaoh tonight and will be saved from Pharaoh in the future. There is always a Pharaoh. It is the same with the Flood and the Renewed call of God to Israel. (It is the same with the Eucharist. The Last Supper is an ironic appellation for a meal that extends forever.) These acts are the great salvation acts of our God—and they can never be stopped. Not by this violent world and not by death.

We can't help but know, in our bones, that the Tomb was empty on the morning of Creation; the Tomb was Empty sometime in the first century, and the Tomb is empty today and forever.

And so, my friends, Mary Magdalene and the other holy women are not dead characters in a story from the murky past. They are you. They are me. And they are now. We are all the good women who have come to the Tomb to prepare the body of our friend. And instead of finding Jesus dead and cold, we find the dazzling men, telling us Jesus is alive. It is happening right this very moment—right this second and in this room. And as a response, the only cry that suits the occasion is Alleluia! Christ is Risen! (pause)

The church spends a great deal of time, breath, energy and ink trying to figure out what salvation means. We can't help ourselves; we like to figure things out. The church even got into a few great and centuries-long arguments about what it means, as I recall. How salvation works, specifically. What is the height and depth and length of grace? How do we plot the axes of our redemption? There's no consensus as far as I can tell. If we ask a Serbian orthodox priest what the Resurrection means, we'll likely get a somewhat different answer than if we were to ask an American Quaker. And if you ask three Episcopalians about the Resurrection, you'll get four opinions.

Most of the ways we try to quantify the Empty Tomb are bound to fail. Mainly because we forget that it isn't a one time event that needs measuring. What was the temperature on the morning Jesus was raised; which tomb, precisely, was the one? Were the dazzling men 6 feet tall? 6'2? Bald? Brunette?

Every question like this misses the point and robs Christians of the deeper truth of this story—that it isn't over. We can't measure it because it is infinite.

Every time a war stops, every time the hungry are fed, every time we see the little Christ in every man, woman and child—every time, the Tomb is Empty all over again. Every time the Christian resists the forces of the world that seek to destroy the people of God, Christ is alive. And that, my Easter brothers and sisters, is the great secret of the Christian faith. We are a people of unlimited hope in the power of God to defeat the agents of death. For every voice in the world that says a Tomb is a place for bones and corpses, there is a chorus of Christians that say that the Tomb is a place for servants of God who shine like the sun. For every voice in the world that says Jesus is dead and buried, there is a chorus of Christians that say Jesus is alive and well in the midst of his followers, breaking bread and telling us not to fear.

So, my sisters and brothers in this holy enterprise, when the powers of this world try to tell you that death and evil are true and inevitable, you will answer with a roar that God has emptied the Tomb in the past, empties the Tomb tonight, and will empty the Tomb in the future until the end of all things.

Christ is Risen!
He is Risen Indeed! Alleluia!