

GREAT VIGIL OF EASTER

Sermon delivered by the Rev. Keith Axberg

To the people of St. Paul's (Mount Vernon)

and

La Gente de La Iglesia Episcopal de la Resurrección

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Mark 16:1-8

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint Jesus. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." 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.

https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Easter/BEasVigil_RCL.html#Gospel

Give ear O heavens, and I will speak; Let the earth hear the words of my mouth; for I will proclaim the name of the Lord, and ascribe greatness to our God!

Dt. 32:1-4 (abbreviated and distilled)

¡Feliz cumpleaños, Resurrección!

Today is your Feast Day! “*Pascua es la fiesta de la resurrección*”

It is a feast day for all of us. We gather this night to usher in a new day, a new season, a new life for all of us.

And not just for all of us, but for the whole world. By the grace of God, we are sisters and brothers in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In our very first lesson tonight, we learn that God created the heavens and the earth, and everything that is in them. God created the sun, the moon, and the stars. God created the land, the seas, the rivers and lakes. God created plants and trees, birds, animals, and all the great & little fishies. Every step of the way, at the end of each day, God stops, turns around, examines every square inch of creation and says, “That’s good, that’s good; WOW! That is oh so very good!”

At the end of this first lesson, before God goes to take a nap on the seventh day, the Sabbath, God stops one last time, and like television Detective Lieutenant Columbo, God rubs his chin and says, “Oh, there’s just one more thing ...”

And with a twinkle in the Divine Eye, “God created the human race IN God’s image. In the image of God – *Imago Dei* – God created them; male and female, God created them ...”

We are the cherry on top.

If you have ever had a banana split – they are quite heavenly – you know what a delightful dessert it is. You take a bowl or a boat and layer it with scoops of ice cream, covered with chocolate sauce, and juicy strawberries, and tangy crushed pineapple; you take the split banana and surround that mountain of goodness with those bananas to help keep all that goodness contained, and when it is done, you add a layer of sweet, thick whipped cream; and after all of that, finally, you top it off with a bright red maraschino cherry.

It is the outward and visible sign that creation of the banana split is finished. It's done. All that's left now is to enjoy that creation the way it was designed to be enjoyed.

We are the outward and visible sign God places atop God's own creation. We are not placed here to subordinate the created order, or to dominate it, or to abuse it, but to take care of it the way God would take care of it.

We were created *Imago Dei* (in the image of God), so that we might live in *Imitatio Dei* (to imitate God) in the way we live and relate to God, to our neighbor, and to “this Earth, our Island home.”

As you know, the human race did very well, but only for a chapter or two.

We decided that creation, like the banana split, was ours to devour, and we have had a rough go of it ever since:

From the primal elements you brought forth the human race, and blessed us with memory, reason, and skill. You made us the rulers of creation. But we turned against you, and betrayed your trust; and we turned against one another. (BCP, p. 370)

The stories we hear at the Great Vigil of Easter – La Gran Vigilia Pascua –take us on a journey. Time and again, we hear the promises of God to save us and forgive us.

When the world was full of evil, God tried to wash away the evil in a great flood. But God protected Noah and his family. God saved them from the flood. God saw death and destruction. God was sorry for making war. God hung the warrior’s bow in the sky and said, “Never again. I will find another way.”

Time and time again, God tries to find another way forward:

God provided a Ram to save Isaac. God provided a Lamb to save us. Right?

God helped free the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. God made a way for them to cross the Red Sea.

The Bible tells us we are slaves to sin. We know the right things to do, but we don’t do them. We know the things we shouldn’t do, but we do them anyway. God has provided freedom for us too. Through baptism, we cross the sea that is red from the blood of Jesus. We are made free in and through Jesus.

In Ezekiel, the Spirit of God hovered over the Valley of Dry Bones. God asks: Can these bones live? Like Ezekiel, we shake our heads and we answer, “O Adonai, only you know (if these bones can live).” God says, “Then talk to them, and I will give them life!”

“Talk to them, and I will give them life.”

Throughout this past week, from Palm Sunday until this day, before the sun set, we have been walking alongside Jesus. We have walked with Jesus through his Passion. We ate supper with him in the upper room. He washed our feet on Thursday night. We prayed with him in the Garden of Gethsemane. On Good Friday, we watched him when he was arrested. We watched as he stood trial, as he was tortured and, finally, nailed to a tree – for you, and for me. “He died, and was buried.” (Nicene Creed). That should have been the end of the story.

PAUSE

NOW! We come to the end of the day. The Sabbath has ended. The sun has set, but the light has not gone out. Today ... today, my friends, is a new day.

It is tempting to burst out in song. I know the feeling. As I was writing my sermon, it was right here I wanted to sing out:

Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia! The strife is o'er, the battle done, the victory of life is won; the song of triumph has begun. Alleluia! Hymnal 1982, #208

It's Easter. It's the feast of the resurrection – *resurrección*.

We should be happy. We should be glad. God has raised Jesus from the dead. The tomb is empty. For 2000 years we have proclaimed this good news to the world. For 2000 years we have celebrated the resurrection of Jesus, not just on Easter Sunday, but every time we gather.

Jesus said, "Whenever two or three of you get together, I will be there." Not "in spirit." Not as "a metaphor."

Jesus said, "I will be there," because God gave Jesus new life. When the women came to the tomb, it was empty, except for a young man. He said to them:

"Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."

We gather here tonight before the empty tomb, and what that young man dressed in white said to the women there, this old man dressed in white says to you, too:

Jesus is going on ahead of us. Go, and you will see him, just as he told you. You and I are his Body. We are his blood. So don't be afraid to live as Jesus lived, and continues to live, in you:

For Christ is risen; the Lord is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

Amen