

April 12, 2009

**The Great Vigil of Easter**

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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It is Easter, but Mark's reading leaves us with... fear. Fear?

What is so terrifying to these women? What made them so afraid?

Joy, now that I could get behind. Confusion, maybe, but terrified? Jesus isn't there, he has been raised! Why so scared? Scared seems like the wrong response in the face of this news.

It is easy to understand, actually. Think about it. All of these years, they had been following him, buying his message, his unheard of claim. They had loved him, taken care of him. They had believed him and believed in him and they had believed that just maybe this was the one who would really change things.

They believed that he was the Messiah. They believed that their following him, their complete and utter devotion to him would bring about their own salvation and the salvation of the whole world.

And it all came crashing down. It was all over.

Then over the last three days everything had been disproven. He was, after all that, powerless. He was a healer who couldn't heal himself after all, a teacher with no lessons left to teach. He had become a joke, a criminal, a nobody.

This Jesus person, their friend and the one on whom they had hung their huge dreams, he had died. DIED. And a gruesome humiliating death, no less. A really human, feeble death.

Not only were they grieving the loss of their companion but also the loss of their dreams and plans for the future with this new Messiah. Their world view had collapsed. They still loved him, but maybe their love had changed shape, like pity.

Over the last 24 hours, during the Sabbath, they had spent time planning their trip to properly prepare the body, the dead body, the body of their friend, Messiah no longer. They had resigned themselves to the idea of death. It was finished.

So no wonder the amazement. No wonder the fear. They were not prepared for this news. They were prepared to say goodbye, not for an angelic proclamation of... what?

What is it that this young man in white tells them? Jesus is raised? Their hopes may not be unfounded after all? Salvation for all could still be possible? Death is not the victor?

Mark leaves us wanting. Mark ends his Gospel without a resolution, without another appearance, without answers. We are left like the women, hanging on, terrified and confused after a grueling week of betrayal and torture and brutal death, wondering what we are supposed to say or do now. What now, Mark?

Mark's answer is silence.

Perhaps it is silence because we know the end of the story.

But perhaps it is silence because it is up to us, like the women, to believe.

In other Gospels we hear the story of the road to Emmaus, where the disciples do not understand that they are talking to Jesus. We have the story of poor Thomas, who cannot believe without seeing it first.

We know these endings to the story. We know that Jesus appears then ascends. We know, deep in our hearts, better than we know ourselves, we know that death has been conquered, that God beat down evil. We know there is nothing to be afraid of.

The women went away terrified and afraid and silent. Those of us who have been participating in Holy Week activities, following the story down deep into the darkness of Good Friday, we come to this morning blinking into the bright light, startled by the shouting.

The Gospel of Mark does not waste time feeding us post-resurrection appearances like so many jelly beans because it is up to us to get our noses out of our books and get into the world, proclaiming like the angel did: "he has been raised, do not be alarmed."

We don't need to go looking in our Gospels for written proof because we should be out in the world looking for them and writing our own.

We are, my friends, an Easter people. We are an Easter people in a world that wants to descend into despair.

We are also an Easter people because we as disciples continue to see the risen Christ everywhere we look.

And we are an Easter people because we choose to carry that vision, the vision of the risen Lord and the conquered cross everywhere we go.

And we are an Easter people because we are becoming the resurrected the Body, not just standing around, passively waiting for it.

We know that this Gospel is indeed Good News, that the angelic young man's news is nothing to be frightened over, but to rejoice, and that the shouting this morning should be carried out into the streets.

The women at the tomb do not know this yet. They are terrified at the implications of an empty tomb. Do they have to shift their world view again? Is it true? Will their hearts be broken again or is this the real thing?

We know for sure what the women do not yet know: that the Lord is risen and that it is indeed good. The world is changed. God is alive. We will never be the same.

Alleluia, the Lord is Risen!