

April 20, 2019
Christ & St. Luke's, Norfolk, VA
The Great Vigil of Easter (RCL/C)
A sermon by the Rt. Rev. James B. Magness

“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?”¹

A few years ago I went back to the small Western North Carolina community where I had been the priest and pastor to my first congregation. I hadn't back been there for over 30 years, so while I was in the area I decided to take a side-trip and walk through the church cemetery to see some of the familiar family names on the grave markers. What started out as mere curiosity – or at least I thought it was mere curiosity – ended up becoming a very emotional and heart-tugging event. As I walked through the maze of grave markers I saw first one and then another and then still another burial place for persons whom once I had known - and loved. Almost every time I saw the name of a person I had known, I remembered a story of how I had had a relationship with a man, woman or child. Some of my memories were sad, some nostalgic, and still others were humorous. When I left after about an hour and a half of wandering through the rows of marble markers I was a different person. When I'd arrived I didn't have any idea of what to expect during my visit. What I learned at leaving was that I had need to go to my former congregation and tarry a while with some old friends.

What motivated Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James to go to Jesus' tomb? I suspect that had you stopped them along the way as they approached the tomb and asked, they wouldn't have known any more about why they were going than I knew why I went to an old parish cemetery.

However, I have my suspicion as to why the women made their trek to the tomb. I believe that they were reacting, as I was in a rural North Carolina cemetery, to a death in death in their spiritual family.

Who were these women. They were the women who had followed and supported Jesus during the three years of his public ministry. They were the first to weep for Jesus at the foot of his cross. Their tears of weeping came as a result of painful shattered dreams that made their hearts bleed. Still weeping with pierced hearts from their sense of abandonment, they were the first to reach his empty tomb. Jesus, their Lord Jesus, had been killed, and when he died, a part of them died as well.

The women knew that an innocent man had been taken from them. As the French thinker Rene Girard has written, he was killed as a scape goat who, for the government and religious leaders, was the solution to all their problems. The women better. All too well they knew that Jesus had been the innocent victim.

¹ Romans 6:3, NRSV.

Gradually trying to come to grips with the reality that their Lord was gone, the women were hoping to find solace in the all but unachievable state we call “closure.” Just then they were startled by the two men, described as being in dazzling white clothing. Abruptly the women were told, “Why do you seek the living among the dead? ...He is risen?”²

I want to pause in the midst of that moment. Had you been there how would you have reacted? We all know what the women did. They went out – immediately – and told the story of what they had seen and heard. First they told the eleven disciples, who by the way didn’t believe them: a fanciful tale that was akin to our contemporary fake news. Not the least dismayed, the women then began to tell anyone else who would listen: He is risen.

Once the women saw and were told by the men in dazzling white clothing what had happened, they began to take action and spread the word. For them there was no other option. In contrast, the Apostle Peter who later peeked into the tomb, scurried back home, sat down and was amazed.³

The disenfranchised, women who had little or no status in the society in which they lived, knew what to do. The news of Jesus’ resurrection had to be told.

This evening, in response to the Easter acclamation that Christ is risen, we have engaged in one of the oldest traditions of our faith. We’ve engaged in the ancient practice of Holy Baptism, renewed our Baptismal vows and through the laying on of hands publicly confirmed the Christian faith of many others. During the early centuries of the Church the Easter Vigil was the only time for Baptism to be performed. Our Christian forbearers believed that the most appropriate response to Jesus’ sacrifice for our sins and his resurrection was to pledge our fidelity to Christ through water baptism. Through baptism we are grafted into Christ’s body, the Church. Through baptism we convey the Christian story to the next generation in hopes that the next generation will then tell their story to those who come after them.

Unto himself Jesus gathers all sorts and conditions, all kinds and varieties of women, men, and children. Like the women at the empty tomb, all of us come to Jesus with our own forms of brokenness that beg to be healed. In the midst of that brokenness Jesus cries out to us, “Come unto me.” Jesus wants us to know that in a most personal way, his death and resurrection has given us the possibility of life.

Just as Mary and the other women were witnesses to the events of the resurrection, so are you. Go ahead. Tell your story. Those women couldn’t wait to tell the story of how their lives had been changed, renewed and sustained. At Easter, we get down to the simplest of stories. It is so simple that each one of us can tell it.

Go ahead.

² Luke 24:5b, NRSV.

³ Luke 24:12, NSRV.

Alleluia, Christ is risen!
The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

AMEN.