

Easter Vigil
April 20, 2019
Church of the Advent
Rev. Ellen Richardson

Fear and Joy

Greetings and blessings on this most holiest of nights in the Church, as the Easter Vigil service invites us to gather and listen to the most wondrous story of God and God's people. From the story of Creation, through the Red Sea deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt, in the call of the prophets telling of the promises of God, to the mystery of the empty tomb, this one night each year we experience a taste of the whole arc of the story of our salvation. Moving together through our history as the people of God, and moving together from darkness to light



reminds us that God has been ever-present with us and all of Creation from the beginning, through blessings and disasters, hardship and triumph, death and life restored.

Tonight we heard from the gospel of Matthew, whose focus at the empty tomb is on an angel of the Lord, whose appearance is like lightning, and whose clothing is as white as snow, so stunning to Pilate's soldiers sent to guard the tomb and prevent the body of Jesus from being stolen, that they shake in fear and pass out. The angel then rolls back the stone that encloses the tomb where Jesus lay, takes a seat, and waits to deliver the best line of understatement ever to the women who had crept through the burial ground in the dark to anoint the dead body of Jesus at first light. *He is not here.*

Can you imagine their response? First of all telling them not to be afraid was probably a waste of breath; if the soldiers passed out, what were a few women supposed to do? But surely the news that Jesus was gone was an unimagined shock. *What? What do you mean, he is not here? And Who are you, anyway? Where did you come from? And just where is Jesus if he's not here?* Surely the most important message in the world must have gotten lost in the shock and anxiety of the moment, though the messenger seemed very cheerfully prepared to deliver it as if

it were the simplest thing in the world—Jesus has been raised, just as he said he would be. And just to prove his case the angel invited them into the tomb, which was empty. That was all it took. They set off running probably barely hearing the angel's final instructions: Jesus would meet his disciples in Galilee. Go and tell them.

In Mark's gospel that is the end of the story. The women run away in terror and amazement because they were afraid. They *don't* tell anyone. And that is *literally* the end of Mark's gospel. Matthew, however gives the women a little more credit. As they are running away from the tomb in fear and excitement, they run right into Jesus. *Greetings!* he says, as if he is a little stunned by the whole experience himself and can't think of anything more profound to say than that. Then Jesus echoes the angel: *do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers I will meet them in Galilee.* The women planted a few kisses on his feet and were off.

On this night, in this particular service, we are reminded that there is fear and joy found all mixed together in *all* of the stories of our salvation from Holy Scripture. This Vigil night reminds us that God's story is revealed and lived through *ordinary* people chosen and touched by God—from Eve and Adam, Moses, Isaiah, Ezekiel, the disciples, and the women who went first to the empty tomb.

In the midst of all of these stories, *we* are invited to enter into the narrative story of God and God's people--by listening, by singing, and by standing together as we will in just a moment to renew our Baptismal Covenant, promising again to become ordinary fearful and joyful participants in God's work in the world, and not just an audience to a great story. Who knows what that will mean in our lives, but we just might find ourselves caught up in something as amazing as God is revealed in our own versions of a burning bush, a parting sea, bones come to life, angels that appear like lightening, or an empty tomb. In any case, may our fear and joy send us running--to go and tell. Amen.