

Easter Vigil 2018

Church of the Advent

### **He is Not Here**

Welcome to this most holiest of nights in the Church, when we gather to recall, recite, and re-enact the most wondrous story of God and God's people. From the very beginning story of Creation, through the Red Sea deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt, through the call of the prophets telling of the promise of God, all the way to the mystery of an empty tomb, this Great Vigil of Easter tells the story of our salvation. The renewal of our baptismal vows in the darkness attests to our faith that even in the darkness, God is ever-present, even when we seem to hold so little light in our hands to show us the way ahead, even when we have trouble grasping that if Christ is risen, that nothing will ever be the same.

Mark's gospel tells the story of the small group of women who crept through the dark to the tomb of Jesus, to care for his body that had been so carelessly wasted and hastily sealed away just before the Sabbath sunset 36 hours earlier. Their waiting for the Sabbath to be over, allowing them to venture out, much less on such an errand, must have been very difficult, with their memory so fresh of being with his mother at the foot of the cross. They had seen the pitiable shape Jesus was in when he was taken down and spirited away. It was likely something they had never done before—going to such a place in the dark, not really knowing what to expect. What moved them bravely towards their plan to anoint that broken body, a plan that did not even include how they would manage to move the stone that had been rolled over the tomb's entrance? It would have been way too heavy for them to manage alone, and yet if they had gathered the nerve to ask men to accompany them—they might have been forbidden to go at all—easier to ask for forgiveness than permission if they got caught. Imagine their shock when they found the stone already gone and instead of a silent, still cold, body, a young man in dazzling white with an startling message, *He is not here*.

*What?* How is it possible that *he is not here?* Hearing anything at all from someone looking so other-worldly would have been tough, for the presentation of a messenger surely colors our acceptance of the message. If they could have found their voices they might have asked, *Who are you? Where did you come from? And just where is Jesus?* 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 he will meet his disciples back at home—on familiar ground—in Galilee. Go and tell.

And 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. There is a longer ending that scholars believe was tacked on later to give the story a more comfortable completion, but originally this was it. The resurrection happened in the dark, without witnesses; the women were the first to find out, and it took a while for the disciples to get the news, and even longer for them to understand it, believe it, and have their lives changed by it.

We live in a world that has offered us so much more knowledge and understanding and communication and sophistication than those ancient women had, and we hear their story with a hindsight and grasp of context that they did not have; yet are *we* any better than they were in taking in the Good News that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that we might have eternal life? Is it really any easier for us to grasp that Jesus Christ was born in human likeness, put to death on a cross? That he has been raised—that *he is not here*? Do we not, in our time and in our own way, run from the enormity of it, flee from the scary wonder of it, and from the message to go and tell the others what we have seen? From being changed by it?

There is fear and the joy found all mixed together in all of the resurrections stories, as the grand drama of salvation is carried out in the lives of ordinary people—ordinary until they were changed by an experience of the risen Lord—whether or not they saw and touched a body that came back from the dead. It is no wonder that the women in Mark's story ran, afraid, and it is no wonder his gospel originally ended right there—honestly and without pretense of a perfect grasp of what was happening. Because what was happening was too big, too hard to understand, and too important to soften. To compensate for this enormity, over time our culture has wrapped Easter up in pastels and flowers and chocolate and bunnies—lightening the weight of that Good News on those who receive it—perhaps even making it easier for some to take it in. But tonight, at this Easter Vigil, like the women, we gather quietly in the dark, retell our stories, and acknowledge our terror and amazement, our fear and joy, at the power of the message that *he is not here!* And we ring in the first light of the Resurrection, trying not to run. Because we know, like the women did, that because once we grasp that *he is not here!* our lives are changed, and we will never be the same. AMEN