

Easter Vigil

At sunrise the three women brought the mixture of spices to anoint the dead body of Jesus. This was the custom, rather than embalming. The spices masked the odors of decomposition! It was to be a last, loving gesture from three of his most devoted followers among the many women who came with him from Galilee. One problem that confronted them was the stone which served as the cover for the rock-hewn tomb in which Jesus' body had been placed. It would somehow have to be rolled back so they could enter. To their amazement, the stone had already been moved, apparently sometime before sunrise! (St. Mark includes the added detail that the stone was "very large".) It clearly did not move by itself. On entering, the women saw not the body they were there to anoint but angelic personages (Mark: a "young man" in white) with a message: The crucified has been raised; see the tomb is empty. Go tell Peter and the other disciples that they will see him "as he told you". This last is a reason not to be so amazed: He told you this would happen! Everything was happening according to plan – God's plan!

The empty tomb and the appearances of Jesus that will soon follow are, at first, terrifying to the disciples in spite of all that Jesus had told them to prepare them for this. After all, Jesus appeared in a new kind of body that had many qualities of our present bodies but some that were completely new and startlingly different. Jesus was showing them a prototype, if you will, of the resurrection body which he had spoken of before. As they allowed themselves to grasp this and to grasp hold of him, they began to trust their eyes and their ears. They believed. And the disciples themselves began to be transformed, too. They became filled with an unspeakable joy, courageous and generous with one another. The disciples – Peter was the prime example – had cowered in fear; Peter had even disowned Jesus. Now they are fearless and full of hope.

So, Paul would later write, as we heard in the reading from Romans that what happened to the disciples was like a death and resurrection, too. The old fearful, doubting cowards had died with Jesus on the Cross. Just as Jesus has risen to a new kind of life, his followers are to join Him. They too had risen from a death to sin - to our self-centered and fearful ways. They had been spiritually reborn, a resurrection while still in this body, but a foretaste of the fullness of Resurrection

that lies beyond our death. These first disciples became resurrection people! And that, my brothers and sisters is what we too are called to be.

These early Christians, all of whom were Jewish, came to see their ancient scriptures in a new way. The deliverance of Israel at the Red Sea from the Egyptians bent on their destruction, became a powerful metaphor for what happened to them at Easter and afterwards. They had been rescued from a slavery to their own weaknesses and sins and fears by the events of Easter. The passing of the Israelites through the waters of the Red Sea came to be seen as a powerful image of Christian Baptism. God's rescue of Abraham's son Isaac by providing his own sacrifice was now seen to foreshadow our rescue from sin by the offering of the Son of God, in our place, on the Cross. Abraham's faith in God parallels God's own willingness to offer his Son.

These early believers also remembered how Jesus had drawn their attention often to the story of creation: how God had created us male and female in His image and likeness for each other and for fathering and mothering, to live not only for ourselves but for those who need our nurture and protection, whether in a married or a celibate life. One of the most remarkable things about the early Christians was the flourishing of this paternal and maternal love in a world that was often cruel and in which life was very cheap.

The message of Easter is one of transformation, not just of the dead body of Jesus, but of our transformation – that we become His resurrection body on earth – embracing a new kind of living, devoted to the truth He had revealed, filled with hope and courage and capable of sacrificial love. Don't walk away from this night as if Easter were about something that happened somewhere else a long time ago to some other people!

“We too must think of ourselves as being dead to sin and (now) living for God in Jesus Christ.” Alleluia! Praise God!