

Easter Vigil – Year A (Mar. 26, 2005)

On this holy night when the church keeps vigil we listen prayerfully to readings from both Hebrew and Christian scriptures that give us highlights from the story of salvation history, that call us to reflect in wonder and awe at the goodness and mercy of a God who loves us all very, very much. From the dawn of creation when God looked on all that he had made and saw that it was very good, through the escape of the Israelites from slavery to the resurrection of Jesus, we hear the sweep of God's dealings with humanity and the call for us to respond, to give ourselves to this good and gracious God.

I used to wonder why it was that in all the readings for the Easter Vigil the church omits the story of the fall. Tradition has it that Jesus came among us to restore what humanity had lost through sin. True enough the Exsultet sings about the happy fault of Adam that won for us so great a Redeemer, but there is no word of sin in our readings tonight, nothing about death. Oh there is the story of Pharaoh's chariots and charioteers drowned in the Red Sea, but the point there is not that Egyptians died, but that God's people lived.

We have completed our Lenten journey; we have followed Jesus to Calvary and watched him die upon the cross. And now we celebrate the unique event that has made all the difference in the world. It's almost as though the Church says, "Enough of thinking of sin and death, let us now celebrate life." And for the moment at least, on this blessed night and through the Easter season, that is just what we do.

In Luke's Gospel the women who had followed Jesus to the cross come to the tomb to anoint his body. Imagine how startled they must have been when they heard the two men say to them, "He is not here, he has been raised." And then those two men, those angels, jog their memories and tell them, "Remember what he told you, . . . that he must be crucified and rise again on the third day." The women remember. Remembering, they rush from the tomb, back to the others. They keep repeating to the apostles what they have seen and heard; but the apostles treat their story as humbug, as so much nonsense, and refuse to believe them. True enough,

Peter runs to the tomb; he, too, finds it empty, but unlike the women, he returns, not believing, but only wondering.

The point is: these women are witnesses. They bear witness to a Christ who is alive. Not because they have seen him; only because his word has come through to them, has touched their hearts, has compelled them to proclaim to one and all, "He is alive." Not only are they witnesses. They are also apostles, sent to bring the good news of the resurrection to others.

Dear friends, on this holy night, we, too, listen once again to the word of God; and we remember, we remember what God said and did for his people in days of old before the time of Christ. And we remember what Jesus said and did, and how he asked us to follow him. We, too, are sent as apostles, bearers of the good news, healers of the wounds and hurts of our suffering brothers and sisters.

And of course we do not do this alone. We do it in the company of others, of this parish, of the Church, of all those who remember what he said.

Tonight we welcome five catechumens to the sacrament of Baptism. In doing so we also welcome them to the company of the Church, to companionship with Jesus and with all of us who make up the Body of Christ. We also welcome to full communion in our midst fourteen candidates who have been baptized in another tradition but who have asked to join us. For all of us, those newly born in baptism and those grown old in our faith, baptism is indeed a breathtaking personal gift. Any action that with one swoop of God's almighty hand washes away all sin, adopts us as God's son or daughter, enrolls us in Christ's community, and grants us on earth a title to heaven, is something to treasure. But not to clutch stingily to our own Christian skin. Baptism sends us out on mission, commissions us to bear witness to a whole little world around us that is looking for the living among the dead: "He is not here."

Joan Chittister, a remarkable Benedictine nun, published an article a few years ago in which she reminds us that our witness is not just to the resurrection of Jesus, but to our own as well. And that requires that we prepare to find God wherever God is by opening ourselves to the world around us with a listening ear. This means we must be prepared to be surprised by God in strange places, in ways we never even thought we'd see

and through the words of those we never thought we'd hear. We must allow others – even those whom we have till now refused to consider – to open our hearts to things we do not wish to hear. We must release the voice of God in everyone. It means putting down the social phobias that protect us from one another. It requires that we clean out of our vocabulary our contempt for “liberals,” our frustration for “radicals,” and our disdain for “conservatives.” It presumes that we reach out to the other – to the gays and the immigrants and the blacks, to the strangers, the prisoners and the poor – in order to divine what visions to see with them, what cries to cry for them, what stones to move from in front of their graves.

Then the resurrection will become true for us. Then our Easter will be complete. Then the Alleluia is true. Jesus, our Lord and Savior is alive and with us. Let us rejoice and be glad.