

The Great Vigil of Easter
April 11, 2009
Mark 16:1-8

In the name of the One God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

"[In my hometown], people [talk about] the past that lies before [them] and the future that lies behind. They point ahead of them when they talk about the past. They point back when they refer to the future."

The young woman from Kenya continues,

"I always thought there was something wrong with the language because once I started in school and studied English I learned that the future lies before us and the past is behind us." (John Paul Lederach in the Moral Imagination; the Art and Soul of Building Peace pp 135-136).

Or so it seems.

We began our vigil this evening in the dark. The shadows of Good Friday, cast by the death of Jesus Christ and his descent into Hell, surrounded us while we gathered. The night was cold. The night was quiet.

But then a new fire was kindled, the bright flames captured our attention. Those of us who were close to the fire could feel its warmth. Again there were shadows, but these shadows were alive – dancing with the movement of the flames, dancing across the faces nearby.

All of our eyes were drawn into this light, our bodies followed our gaze. And we sang in gratitude as we followed the new light, the light of Christ, into the sanctuary.

And then by the light of the new fire, we listened to ancient stories – stories that were at times inspiring, mystifying, and liberating and, at other times, grotesque and terrifying. These are the stories of our past, and we know all too well how they lie before us this night.

We hear these stories and we think about our world, our families, our bondage, our mortality. Our concerns are very present with us.

Yet, so is grace. So is victory. So is Christ.

We know we are listening to ancient stories that relate events that happened millennia ago. Yet, we also sing that THIS IS the night. We proclaim that THIS IS the most holy night when our Lord Jesus passed over from death to life. We hear that THIS IS the Passover of the Lord, in which, by hearing his Word and celebrating his Sacraments, we share in his victory over death.

We say: THIS IS the night. We are not simply hearing stories or remembering past events that happened to and for other people. This past always lies before us and we enter into it tonight. We make these events alive and present, we live into them tonight.

This is the night, when [God] brought our fathers, the children of Israel, out of bondage in Egypt, and led them through the Red Sea on dry land.

This is the night, when all who believe in Christ are delivered from the gloom of sin, and are restored to grace and holiness of life.

This is the night, when Christ broke the bonds of death and hell, and rose victorious from the grave...

How blessed is this night, when earth and heaven are joined and man is reconciled to God.

How blessed is this night!

How blessed are we to participate in this night. In this one night we too have passed from darkness into light and been freed from sin and death.

Just a few moments ago, we let the waters of Baptism wash over us once again. And as the drops of water fell on each of us, our promises again met God's promise that we share in Christ's death and resurrection.

So like the three women in today's gospel, as this night soon gives way to early morning, we go to the empty tomb that lies ever before us, searching for Christ.

We, too, meet the man in the tomb.

He says to us,

"Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."

Christ is going ahead of us. Then and now. Our past is ever before us - going ahead of us into Galilee. Having gone through love and loss, distress and joy, celebration and tears, sweat and blood, fear and fear realized, sacrifice, abandonment, death and hell, Christ goes ahead to Galilee like he promised.

Be not afraid.

He goes before you always.

Go follow him.

These words might sound familiar to some of you. They are found (more or less) in a song by John Michael Talbot, a composer of contemporary church music. Though not a fan of contemporary church music myself, I admit to humming "Be not afraid" all week; it's terribly catchy.

Though if you don't know this song, an example from our prayer book provides another illustration. Listen to the post communion prayer found in the Rite 1 service:

"And we humbly beseech thee, O heavenly Father, so to assist us with thy grace that we may continue in that holy fellowship, and do all such good works as thou hast prepared for us to walk in."

God has prepared the path for us to walk. Yet, there are many roads we'd rather not walk down. Many places we'd rather not go. Doors we'd rather not open for fear of what lies behind. Rocks we'd rather not roll away. Rocks we simply cannot roll away ourselves.

The good news of this night, though, is that God rolls away these rocks. God prepares the way. God in Jesus walks before us. We still have to live our very human lives this night, crippled at times by pain and fear, broken relationships and anxiety.

But the great joy of this night is that we never have to go ANYWHERE where God is not. Even in the most remote places of our fear, God is there. God is alive in that place. This Holy Week has taught us that there is no place God has not been, there is no experience God has not had.

There is no dark place, no covered tomb, no desolate Garden, no court, no prison, no table, no relationship, no darkness at all - that exists apart from the light of Christ, the light kindled new this very night.

This light, this eternal Word, goes before us always. It is as if our future lies behind us, having been present always, and our past is ever before us, walking to Galilee and beyond, drawing us out of darkness.

Jesus Christ, the eternal Word made flesh, affects our salvation through his entire life, death, resurrection and ascension. When we had fallen away from God, he came to draw us back into the heart of God, the very center of life in God - the love from which he came to live among us.

And this night we go with the women to the tomb, we find it empty and hear that Jesus has been raised from the dead and goes before us to Galilee. In this we find our joy.

Certainly, if Jesus had remained in the tomb, had died never to be raised, his story would still be one for the ages. His would be a story of a great man, who lived a great life – who helped the poor, the sick and the marginalized, who questioned authority and injustice, who shed light on ancient scriptures and made them alive for a new generation. His would be the story of a great man who was a religious and moral example for thousands.

But, if he had remained in the tomb, had died never to be raised, we would speak about him as we spoke about all the dead before him. We would remember his story, but never make him present with us. The past would always remain behind us.

Today, though, we know Jesus lies before us. He goes before us to Galilee - like he said he would.

And he goes before us into the heart of God.

Christ brings all he went through on earth with him into the very heart of God. All of life - redeemed. All of us - redeemed.

This is the night, when all who believe in Christ are delivered from the gloom of sin, and are restored to grace and holiness of life.

This is the night, when Christ broke the bonds of death and hell, and rose victorious from the grave...

How blessed is this night, when earth and heaven are joined and man is reconciled to God.

Amen.