

Easter Vigil, March 22, 2008

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Genesis 1, Exodus 14, Isaiah 55, Ezekiel 36, Romans 6, Matthew 27-28

A failure—obviously. A serious breach—certainly.

But don't those harried Higher-Ups in the Office of Security deserve some sympathy?

They got actionable intelligence (The disciples might steal their master's body).

They deployed not just one line of defense, but two. (They sealed the stone & set a guard.)

The threat they set out to defend against did not, in fact, materialize.

(No body snatchers ever penetrated the security perimeter).

But, alas, the efforts of The Office of Security were overpowered—

undone by factors they could neither predict nor control—

a landscape-shifting earthquake, and an angel with an attitude.

A “face like lightning” this angel had—

that would fry my courage, wouldn't it zap yours?

There is, after all, only so much the Office of Internal Security can do!

And Resurrection is not one of those things against which people can be made secure.

The tomb is empty. Jesus rises, regardless.

Something inside me just says YESSS!!!!

“Take THAT,” Temple Authorities! “So THERE, Roman Guards!

“Christ is risen! Alleluia! And we'll all live happily ever after!”

But the story Matthew tells is not that simple; it's conclusion not so pat.

Matthew is too much a realist—

he knows, at least as well as we,

that it takes more than a Resurrection, per se,

to break the death grip of entrenched political and religious ideology.

So Matthew does not end his Gospel with “Happily Ever After.”

Because, if the Office of Security deserves some sympathy,

then the media managers in the Office of Public Information deserve some admiration.

They are very good at what they do!

No sooner does word leak out that Life Everlasting has been loosed upon the world,

then they kick into total damage control:

Yes, the body snatchers did outsmart our security forces.

Hearings will be called, investigations undertaken.

Mistakes will be corrected, measures enhanced.

But, not to worry—no serious damage has been done.

Everyone is still safe from Resurrection.

When the terrifying alternative is facing Life Who cracks like lightning—

well—a bit of bureaucratic egg on the face (they rightly figure) is a small price to pay—

even after you factor in paying off the guards for taking a bum rap.

So—here’s the question:

How does Resurrection Light contend with that kind of devious darkness?

How does Life Everlasting confront the seemingly invincible engines of death?

That’s what Matthew wants us to wrestle with.

And he invites us to join eleven disciples

whom the Risen Christ has called into conference up on top of a mountain.

Some of these disciples have doubts, Matthew tells us.

I do! Don’t you? (At least we’re in good company!)

Jesus is starting to speak now: Listen up!

-- “All authority in heaven and earth is given to me.”

-- “Risen? OK. But he’s got ALL AUTHORITY? I don’t THINK so!”

-- “Go! Make disciples of all nations!”

-- “Yeah, right—HOW?”

-- “Baptize them!”

-- Oh my God!

The reservations of these doubting disciples are utterly appropriate.

They know (though longstanding custom inclines us to forget)

that “baptism” did not—does not—mean

simply a little ceremonial water splashing.

Baptism in the early church was an adult affair—and a dangerous business.

To sign on for baptism could well mean signing your own death certificate in advance.

St. Paul minces no words:

“Don’t you know that we who have been baptized into Christ Jesus

Were baptized into his death?

What does Paul mean by that?

Not just that none of us here will leave this earth alive—though that is true.

Not just that we all have addictions to which we have to die—though that is also true.

Not just that we must sometimes make costly sacrifices—though that is true as well.

Paul means that when we identify with Christ in “a baptism like his.”

we are embracing Jesus’ own way of dealing with the systemic culture of death.

And that is a daunting prospect, indeed—one vividly depicted for us this evening

by the two symbols in which we have been bathed: Light and Water

From the book of beginnings, we have heard how God sang the world into being:

Calling forth light from darkness

Shaping chaotic waters into life-giving streams.

From the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel we have heard God’s solemn pledge  
to bring forth fresh water from deserts of human destruction:

water that satisfies our deep-down thirst for social righteousness;

water that washes away ground-in grime

built up over generations of dirty political dealing.

Life-giving water, thirst-quenching water, cleansing water—welcome words!  
But along with these words have come less welcome ones:

The words of one story we could have read, but didn't. (Too hard to hear, perhaps?)  
And the words of another we are required to read. (No matter how hard to hear!)

These are both stories of death by drowning—Noah and the Flood, Moses and the Exodus.  
Taken out of context, and all by themselves,  
they can make God sound like the Ultimate Paranoid Security Chief—  
one who eradicates anything that threatens or opposes the party line.

But listen again from the vantage point of Salvation History, opening for us into Jesus Christ:  
“Baptize them, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”  
“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus  
were baptized into his DEATH?”

If the story we have walked through this week has any bite,  
it is not that Jesus dies—poor, innocent victim—but comes back to life (so it's all OK).  
No—that story is too simple; its conclusion too pat.  
Jesus neither condones nor capitulates to the culture of death.  
But he does not just take it ON, he takes it IN.  
He plunges into the center of death's inexorable vortex.  
He gives up all rights to rescue, any hope of riding out the storm.  
Only in being buried with the culture of death that does him in,  
does he defeat death's vicious cycle.

The earliest Christians took baptism seriously.  
Preparation lasted three years—  
not only because Life in Christ was so much to embrace,  
but also because it made you so vulnerable to the powers that be.  
The Christian community wanted baptismal candidates to be sure  
that they were up for what they were in for.  
And what if you were apprehended and executed before your baptism at the Easter Vigil?  
“No matter” was the answer. “You will, in that dying, be baptized in blood.”  
But what about our children?  
“We will baptize them in response to your faith in the power of Jesus' resurrection.”

So baptism was not—is not—a desperate attempt to avoid hell fire in a life to come,  
or to escape all threat of injury in our life on earth.  
WHAT, then? In baptism, we are inducted into a Christ-like Culture of Life.

For Stuart—who has chosen discipleship.  
For Winifred whose parents, James and Jennifer;  
make that choice for her until she is old enough to confirm it for herself;  
For us who, in doubt and faith, re-commit ourselves to vows made long ago  
on our own volitions, or on our behalf;  
For every one of us, baptism is an entrance into Resurrection life.  
A life in which, as Paul says of the Risen Christ—  
Death no longer has dominion—no longer has control.

The lights are bright in the sanctuary now.  
Bells are rung; Alleluia's sung.  
It is meet and right to celebrate resurrection in the light.

But these two baptisms have been—realistically—conducted in the dark.  
Light in here now—it is still dark outside.  
And when we gather tomorrow, after the rising of the sun  
to celebrate once more God's Risen Son,  
there will still be darkness outside.  
Not just on the other side of the world, but in this land,  
a darkness that mere daylight cannot dispel.  
A darkness that justifies war in terms of making us feel "safer,"  
rather than assessing war  
in terms of human cost, moral quandaries, and highly questionable practices.  
A darkness that pinches pennies for medical research, public education, and social services,  
but quickly writes big checks in hopes of damage control  
over investor losses that stem from irresponsible lending practices.  
A darkness that—as has been well-named this week—  
holds white and black alike incarcerated in radical racial misunderstanding.

In the midst of darkness like THAT, you and I hold forth candles of light.  
"Receive the light of Christ" we tell the newly baptized.  
"Let there BE light" God declares, and it is so.

In the lovely phrases of K/J English, the Prologue to John's Gospel sings out these words:  
"The light shineth in the darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not."  
This is a light the Culture of Darkness does not understand.  
This is a light the Culture of Darkness cannot quench.

"Happily ever after" will not happen in your lifetime or in mine.  
But all our security systems are hereby put on notice:  
Earthquakes happen.  
Angels with an attitude surge through the defenses of the Culture of Death.  
In Jesus, God's new life breaks forth upon the world.  
Sing it in the light. Chant it toward the dark. Alleluia.