

This sermon was delivered in two parts. The first in the lower level parish hall, immediately after Lessons that were read in candle-lit darkness: The Story of Noah and the Flood (from Genesis 7-9), The Story of Moses and the Israelites at the Red Sea (from Exodus 14-15), and The Story of Ezekiel and the Dry Bones (from Ezekiel 37)

1) *In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.*

That's the first line in the first reading we often hear at the Easter Vigil.

To "start at the very beginning," is "a very good place to start."

The Genesis creation story—wind across water, light bursting from darkness,  
chaos spoken into order, step by step—

the story frames our expectation of a time-honored arc—

one that moves inexorably from "Once Upon a Time" to "Happily Ever After."

Complexity and conflict come in between, of course; but the upbeat outcome is never in doubt.

In the standard story line, bad guys give good guys a run for their money;

but good guys finally win—death and destruction playing the role of means to the end.

Tonight, however, we didn't start with *In the beginning*.

First we heard about all life destroyed, save for a few safely stowed in the ark.

Then we heard about an army lying dead on the seashore,

as their former captives walk through parted waters on dry ground.

Both of these tales are fixtures in the drama called "salvation history".

But considered on their own, they are sobering at best.

Wind and water—they bring chaos as well as order; they usher in not just life, but death.

Say what you will about WHO might be guilty of WHAT;

at the end of the day, for some, at least;

"God the Creator" can sound like a euphemism for "God the Destroyer."

2) These stories come down to us from ages past by way of human scribes.

It's fair to wonder, therefore—whether the meaning of these mighty acts of God

has been subjected to the spin of self-proclaimed "good guys,"

as they go toe-to-toe with those they deem the "bad guys".

We don't HAVE to wonder how such tales have been selectively employed.

They have, too often, been coopted to validate and justify strategies of vengeance:

*We're the ones on the side of the angels.*

*If God can thus dispatch the bad guys, surely, so can we.*

*That, indeed, is what God wants—so let the floods begin!*

Now, the two sagas of divine destruction we've just heard

have been somewhat balanced by a story of divine resuscitation—

dry bones reconnected, enfleshed, breathed back to life, and standing on the earth.

That is, perhaps, reassuring—it does, after all, nicely fit the narrative trope.

But in Ezekiel's vision, it's only the "good guys" who get thus reconstituted.

What about the rest of humanity—they—and we—all of us, both bad and good—

those overwhelmed by the floods, or left as desert-dry bones—

what hope for re-creation remains for them, for us—THAT IS the Easter Vigil question.

Where does the question lead? Let's follow it out—and up—and see.

At this point, the choir, congregation, and ministers ascended from the lower level of the church to the narthex, where, in subdued light, Baptismal Vows were renewed. Then, as bells were rung and lights lifted, everyone processed into the nave of the church for the First Celebration of Easter. The second part of the sermon was delivered after the readings of a Lesson from Romans 6:3-11 and The Gospel from Luke 24:1-12.

3) *Why seek the living among the dead?*

What a silly question—why would anyone do THAT?

Maybe it's a merely rhetorical question—meant to spark the answer: *DUH—HOW DUMB!*

Yet coming, as we have just heard it—from two men dressed like lightning—

and addressed, as it is, to women grieving, terrified, disoriented—

*Why seek the living among the dead?* sounds more like an expression of compassion.

It gives the women space to catch their breath—to turn and face a radically different world.

But for those of us who hear the familiar story from a distance,

*Why seek the living among the dead?* is a serious, soul-searching question.

That “seeking” happens all the time. In quest of elusive *Happily Ever Afters*, self-defined; death is often not just countenanced, it is actively courted.

*We can't win unless they lose*—the argument, the election, the conflict, the war—

*We can't live unless they die. Happily Ever After for us, isn't Happily Ever After for them.*

*Not everyone can live that story—There just isn't “HAPPILY” enough to go around.*

4) Into this narrative—so hard-wired in the human psyche—

Into this narrative the sacred story-tellers commence a patient, relentless, subversive work.

They honor our yearnings for meaning and stability, for rescue and for liberation;

They also acknowledge our desperate striving for life in ways that engender cycles of death.

They do recognize a moral difference between inflicting slavery and nurturing freedom;

and they also name God as the ultimate power behind both living and dying.

BUT they come to see this God as a Personal Power Who embraces suffering, endures evil,

who takes death and destruction totally to Heart, rather than inflicting it back on others;

A God who doesn't destructively de-select some to grant happiness to others.

A God who calls Covenant People to share in the role of Strong But Suffering Servant.

In short, a God who turns the narrative of kill-or-be-killed inside out;

and breaks its vicious cycle.

Then, say the Gospel writers, God shows up among us—up close and personal—

to do that death-destroying work among us—alongside us—to show us how it's done.

Life, not life won by escaping or imposing death, only to be done in by death yet again.

NO, life offered up to death, and brought forth from death—life eternal—beginning now.

God's intent in creation—recertified and validated in Jesus' death and resurrection.

A death and a resurrection, says Paul, into which you and I are baptized, and in which we share.

5) *It seemed to them an idle tale*, says Storyteller Luke, of how word about a Risen Lord

sounded to his male disciples—so that word still sounds today.

The standard trope is hard-wired still—“seeking the living among the dead.”

But death need have no longer—nor does it anymore possess—a paralyzing sting.

For Christ is risen, and so, with Him, are we. Buried with him in a death like his.

Raised with Him in a life like his—That's worth saying *Alleluia*, over.

And so we do—*Alleluia, Christ is Risen. The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia.*