

The Easter Vigil
April 19 2014
Matthew 28.1-10
St. Augustine's, Freeland

Blessed be the Name of God

The darkness was slowly moving toward light and Mary Magdalene moved with it. Dark to light. As she moved, she wouldn't have known to name the morning as later generations would. For her, it was the first day of the week, ordinary, except, of course, for the death of Jesus. In the dark of that morning, the dark that gave way to light, she saw simply the dawning of a new and, in her deepest heart, a very dispirited, sorrowful day. Though in nature, the morning light came to life, so far as Mary Magdalene knew, in her life the darkness would persist. Jesus had died!

But the day that was dawning would be a day of mysterious triumph, a day later generations would call Easter, *Pascua*, resurrection day, the eighth day, the first day of eternity. And the energy of transformation, the energy that moves from darkness to light, would become the template and pattern for everything that was to follow.

From very early times, on the eve of Easter, on this night of anticipation, the night before the first dawn of the new world, the Church would gather to await the light. The Church would gather in the dark, knowing that the dark itself had been overcome. The Church would

gather to be reminded of the triumph of light over darkness, the triumph of grace over sin, the victory of breath over death.

From very early times, when we gathered in this anticipatory darkness, those seeking baptism would come forth, having been taught by the Church and brought forward by their sponsors. They were seekers, offering themselves for inclusion in a new way of life, a new standard of conduct, a new kind of community, a new set of responsibilities. And they were blessed and exorcised, anointed and bathed, wrapped in white garments and welcomed into the body of the Church. They promised to take up the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to be constant in the breaking of the bread and in prayer. They took up the responsibilities of life in Christ.

In this early time, it was a fearsome thing to be a Christian. The practice of our faith made us suspect, at least if we were true to our promises. We had no legal standing. The government gave us no right to exist. We could not meet in public; we could not build public buildings; we could not adorn ourselves with religious ornaments and jewelry. We had to conceal ourselves in faith. We could not in good conscience, for example, pledge our allegiance to the emperor, who was understood by the general population to be a god. If we refused that allegiance, we were severely punished, perhaps with death. Of course, some of us relented, perhaps many of us. What difference did it make if we poured out a little wine to honor the emperor? It would save our necks and, really, nobody

would notice. If we held firm, we could conceivably perish. Being a Christian was risky business.

Preparation for baptism took a long time—three years we're told. Some who sought baptism even had to change jobs because the Church could not reconcile their work with the expectations of the Christian life. Baptism, in those days, was an adult matter. Children were baptized when the parents were baptized but not otherwise. Infant baptism as the rule would have to wait a good long while. Baptism in those days required of adults a willingness to change, a willingness to take risks, a willingness to admit to darkness in themselves and to seek the light.

Baptism was built on turning from the one to the other, from darkness to light. In fact, the ancient question began, "Do you turn..." That question remains in the rite we have celebrated tonight. "Do you turn..." In former times, the candidate who said "yes," would, in fact, turn, turn toward the rising sun, turn toward the light of resurrection, turn from darkness to light.

In earlier times, the rite we celebrate tonight would take all night. We would begin at nightfall, light the new fire, read the stories of God's mighty acts and we would feed on the history of salvation, the extraordinary things God has done to keep hold of us and to keep us safe. Then we would baptize those who came forward, those prepared to take up the challenge and the responsibility and the risk of the water

and oil of baptism. We would welcome them. We would greet the newly baptized with the kiss of peace, warmly and for the first time ever.

Then, having done all that, we would keep watch, wait on that night and watch. Some of us, like other disciples before us, would fall asleep but others, a remnant, would watch—and thereby we would keep the vigil of Easter, our hearts eager to move to the light. At dawn, we would re-assemble and gather around the table and celebrate the Holy Mysteries. In that holy meal together, we would share the foretaste of the Greater Banquet that awaits. In the holy meal and in those who gathered with us, we would meet the One who was risen.

Yesterday afternoon and evening, around the world, the Church marked the Friday we call Good. By means of the Stations of the Cross and the Good Friday Liturgy, the Church was brought to this night. We got here by means of the *Via Crucis*, the *Via Dolorosa*., the Way of the Cross.

Jesus is condemned to death. Jesus takes up his cross. Jesus falls the first time. Jesus meets his afflicted mother. The Cross is laid on Simon of Cyrene. A woman wipes the face of Jesus. Jesus falls a second time. Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem. Jesus falls the third time. Jesus is stripped of his garment. Jesus is nailed to the Cross. Jesus dies on the Cross. The body of Jesus is placed in the arms of his mother. Jesus is laid in the tomb. At at the tomb, the Church says, “Savior of the

world, by your cross and precious blood you have redeemed us: Save us, and help us, we humbly beseech you, O Lord.”

Then, the Church around the world went back into the world in silence and in darkness, despairing but made ready, ripe for the surprise of the light that is coming.

The angel who met Mary Magdalene and the other woman with her told them to go to Galilee and he would meet them there, yet Jesus surprised them on the way. “Don’t be afraid...” To us, the angel said to come here, to this room, to be with these people. And as with those first women, Jesus meets us here and with surprise, saying yet again, “Don’t be afraid.”

You and I have come here many times expectantly, knowing that we would find the Risen One in bread and wine. I know, as well, just as you do, that the faces that surround us here are the faces that express the love of Jesus; the bodies that join us here are the body of Christ, Corpus Christi; the hands of welcome that greet us here, they are the hands of Jesus. The Risen One has come ahead of us and meets us here.

This wonderful, modest room is the place where faith is rekindled, where a thirst for joy is set loose, where grace surprises. The liturgical pilgrimage of the Christian faith is accomplished here. It’s amazing. Equipped for service and faithful living, resurrection happens here.

When we end our celebration on this evening, the light of dawn will not yet have come. But no matter. We have received the light of Christ, just as surely as those women who went first to the tomb—the ones who were told, “Don’t be afraid...for he has been raised...” We have indeed moved with Christ from darkness to light. Our “alleluias” are surely proof of that!

Blessed be the Name of God.

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