

Easter Vigil 2016
St Augustine's
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WELCOME TO THE TOMB

Welcome to the tomb. This is not a very convincing Easter story, is it? Do you hear any trumpets blasting? But this is the story of who we are. This is the story that makes us Christians, a people who have faith in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ.

Let us listen to what Luke is telling us. First, we have a couple of men of rather odd appearance who terrify the women. It is not obvious who they are. They may be messengers of God, or they may be coming home from a late-night costume party.

Is this the stuff we call our faith?

And we have Peter who is completely bewildered at finding his close friend gone and all of these women blathering on about the Son of Man rising on the third day.

Is this the stuff we call our faith?

And as for the women we know as Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Mary -- in their society, their word was worth nothing.

Is this the stuff we call our faith?

We are building our beliefs on men who may or may not be angels, a befuddled friend, and some frightened women. Not one of them would be a credible witness in a court of law.

So...why are we here? Something is bringing us to the tomb in expectation, in yearning, maybe even in belief. It can't be anything we know.

The Resurrection is not about knowledge. If we are seeking proofs following the scientific method, we will fail every time.

In the 1930s, for example, archeologists in Israel found an empty burial tomb from the first century inscribed: "Yeshua bar Yehoseph," which translated means, "Jesus Son of Joseph." Some were very excited by this finding, saying, "Yes! This confirms that Jesus rose from the dead!"

But this finding confirms nothing. Yeshua and Yehoseph were common names from this time period, and the bones could have been stolen by people or carried away by animals. *An empty tomb does not equal a risen God.*

An empty tomb our minds can understand. A risen God, and what this means for our lives, 2,000-plus years later, we cannot. Not unless we accept the gift of faith, which means that we accept God's presence among us without logical proof.

I, too, stood outside the tomb for many years. I knew the story but that is all it remained: One story I heard among many. Jesus did this, Jesus said that, in a time and in a place long ago and far away.

Then came the moment. I was both Mary and Peter, terrified and amazed, and so afraid that if I believed it my life would be changed, and into what I did not know.

At the Easter Vigil 24 years ago, I said, "I believe." I was baptized into this faith because I could stand outside the tomb no longer. I had to gather my doubts and follow, even though I did not know where I was going. When someone close to me asked me before my conversion, "Do you really believe this story?" I answered, "Well...I think I'll grow into it."

Which was evasive shorthand, I admit, for being unable to explain that my while my heart was trumpeting "Alleluia," my head was mumbling, "I don't believe this."

This wasn't just any story. It is *the* Story. The Resurrection. The story not only of a Jewish peasant but of an Incarnate God, not only of a man we now call Jesus but of the Risen Christ, and not at all of an imaginary friend or lover, but of God-within-Us, the One who died to raise humanity from the junk heaps of poverty, of hate, of fear, of ignorance. From all that makes us less than the image of God.

This is the story we remember what God did for us so we can know who we are. We are what's next. How we do and what we do it is up to us. As it was up to Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary who were prepared to their loving friend, and now, guess what -- they had to prepare themselves for a Resurrected Life. Grief is easy. Resurrection is difficult. "I don't believe" stops becoming an option.

As it was with Peter. Part of him was betting on doubt -- there isn't much responsibility with doubt -- but part of him couldn't shake off this story. How terrifying it must have been to trust that his own life was truly written in this profound mystery.

This is the night we are readers and listeners of the story no more. We are the story. As St. Athanasius famously said 300 years after the Resurrection: God became human so that we may become divine.

We are the stuff that is our faith.

Alleluia.

And the people say...

