

Easter Vigil
Mark 16:1-8
“Eastering”

Holy Saturday is in-between time, that is, in between the crucifixion and the first appearances of the risen Christ. Together, we watch and wait patiently for the Easter dawn. In the Anglican tradition, the Great Vigil liturgy moves us from the waiting to the first service of Easter Day, as we greet the risen Christ with the ringing of bells and singing alleluia.

We tend to think of life as an inexhaustible well. We have places to go, things to do. The sheer length of Lent sometimes catches us by surprise; the slower and more contemplative pace begins to weigh on us. After these forty days (and six Sundays!) we are eager to get going again, to burst into the daylight life of spring.

To go ‘eastering’. Easter should not be just a noun describing a single event of resurrection almost two thousand years ago, nor even a once a year holy event – let’s use *easter* as a verb, or state of being, gathering energy, springing forward.

Tonight we take time to notice the gathering darkness, to savor the smell of the wood smoke of the new fire, to wait in the chilled evening as the light of the new fire is spread first to the Paschal Candle, the light of Christ. To notice how that light is then spread to the other candles in the church, to light our own candle for the Vigil waiting. To listen to the Deacon chant the Easter proclamation, the Exsultet. To sit in the semi-darkness of candlelight and hear the stories of our salvation history, and how the people of the Scripture understood God.

‘With Miriam we will dance and celebrate the day...
The journey never ends, God’s promise calls us on.’

We need to take time to notice because everything happens only a certain number of times, and a very small number, really. How many more times will you remember a particular afternoon of your childhood, some event that’s deeply a part of your being? How many more opportunities will you have to walk the Way of the Cross, to contemplate the “good” of Good Friday, or to experience the Great Vigil of Easter?

Life takes on a special poignancy precisely because our time is limited. It becomes richer and more meaningful because of it.

Yet we also crave the resolution of death promised by resurrected life. In a very literal sense, we are unsure, even confused by the physical resurrection of the Christ. We are challenged to align our life experience with *hope*.

The Gospel passage conveys urgency, uncertainty, lack of resolution. What now? What’s next?

After the crucifixion, Joseph of Arimathea claimed Jesus' body, wrapped it in linen cloth and placed it in a cave-tomb. According to Mark's Gospel, there was not even a gesture of proper burial rites. It was, after all, Friday evening, and Joseph was in a hurry to dispose of the body before the sabbath. After the crucifixion, the male disciples fled, they were hiding out. But in the early dawn light of the third day, three women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, gathered spices to anoint the body of Jesus and perform the burial rites. The body would have already become putrid – theirs was an act of courage and deep devotion to their fallen teacher. As they walked towards the tomb, the women worried whether they would be able to roll away the heavy stone that closed the entry.

The stone had already been rolled back.

There was a young man there, inside the tomb. The clothing of the young man, the dazzling whiteness, brightened the darkness of the tomb. He showed them the shelf where the body had lain. He told them, '*he has been raised, he is not here.*'

Not 'he is risen', as if getting up from sleep, but *he has been raised*. This is an act of God, no mistaking it. Mark's Gospel story is not about what the women see, but about what God has done.

In Jerusalem a year ago, I visited a cave identified as 'the tomb.' You have to stoop to enter, there is room for only two or three to stand at a time. There were long lines of people waiting. Despite the commercialization, the souvenirs, the tourism, this cave with the rock shelf felt holy, a place of God. How is it that a small, empty space is holy? I felt I was standing on the border of the knowable, and the unknowable.

The three women were deeply grieving the loss of their teacher and friend. They grieved the loss of the dream of kingdom. The women gathered to begin their mourning, to put closure to the three grueling but exciting years of discipleship. They came to the tomb with spices for burial because they did not really believe Jesus would be resurrected.

But, things are not what they expected, the dream is alive, Jesus, son of Man, son of God, is not dead. They do not know how to react. They are in shock. Physical resurrection transcends all logic, and common sense.

None of the gospel accounts tells us exactly what happened, there is no eyewitness to the actual moment, "*He has been raised.*" The women flee in terror and amazement. 'They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.'

What will the women say? This is just where Mark's Gospel leaves off. What's next? The women do not know what lies beyond, but they know that what has happened changes everything. If the dream is not dead, if the Redeemer lives, then their work as disciples must continue. Indeed, their work is just beginning.

We have all experienced the unexpected – we have many such moments – and we know it takes time to re-gather our wits and formulate a response. A good friend, or loved one, discovers he has cancer. A pregnant mother learns she is carrying triplets. A senior executive is fired by his Board of Directors. A female voice reads the role of Jesus in the Passion narrative. A friend offers a meditation question, “does God pray?”

Unexpected. Shocking. Painful. Difficult. Our perceptions of reality are skewed, put off-balance by the unexpected. Whether in joy or in sorrow, we let go of the illusion that life as we knew it will continue in the same way.

Just so, Resurrection puts us off balance. Resurrection is an invitation to a new way of life. We must accept the invitation to find out what it means.

This new way of life – our spiritually resurrected life – begins with ambiguity and uncertainty.

With baptism, we die and rise with Christ. Tonight, we renewed our vows. What about ‘eastering’? To what actions are we invited by our baptismal vows? Our hope for the future – grounded in the risen Christ – guides us in how to act now. We align our earthly lives with the hope, the expectancy of resurrected life. We release death instead of holding on to it. We do not fear it.

In a world of violence and uncertainty, we are freed to experience the joy and peace of God’s presence. And we are commanded to continue as disciples, to easter.

What might we say about eastering at this moment in our salvation history, April 2015? Consider the tentative and already disputed plan for agreement with Iran. Envision our country about to embark on the presidential electioneering which divides us every four years. Think about the young Christian boys in Kenya murdered by militant Muslims earlier today.

Theologian Dietrick Bonhoeffer said, ‘loving one’s enemies leads disciples to the way of the cross and into communion with the crucified one.’

How do we treat our enemies as brothers and sisters? In the Lenten Reflections *40 day journey*, based on Bonhoeffer’s work, the editor Ron Klug suggests these intercessions:

Pray that your enemies might receive every good from the hand of God, and in response become instruments of God’s love and justice.

Let me not so much want victory over my enemies as true and mutual reconciliation with them.

The triumph of Easter is before us. Let us Easter with the practice of reconciliation.

Christ is risen! Amen

The Rev. Diane Ramerman April 4, 2015