

April 3, 2021, Easter Vigil
Gospel of Mark 16:1-8
Fr. Brad

Of all the liturgies in the Catholic Christian liturgical year, this one is the biggest. The Easter Vigil which inaugurates the celebration of the Resurrection of the Lord on Easter Sunday is the summit celebration of the Christian life. Renewal and rebirth are primary themes. That is why it is appropriate that at this liturgy, we traditionally welcome new members into the Church through Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist.

We are present tonight, in person or virtually, because we believe and want to remember and live our faith in Jesus Christ. We re-tell the sacred stories of Scripture, and we eat and drink of the Body and Blood of Jesus as he has asked us to do when he says, 'do this in memory of me'. This is the best way we know how, as a faith community, to pass this life-giving message on to our children. And it has been going on for over two thousand years. And as the Eucharist has its origins in the Jewish Passover meal, we can say the tradition has been around much longer.

By His Resurrection, Jesus teaches us that death does not have the last word after all. And sin has no lasting deadly effect on humanity. And He has accomplished it, not by brute force or violence but by being a humble suffering servant who willingly laid down His life so that we and every creature loved into life by God, would have that life forever.

At this vigil, we hear Mark's Gospel account of Mary Magdalene and other women coming to the tomb early in the morning to anoint the body of Jesus. They come, perhaps needing closure and proof of what had so harshly unfolded over the last two days. They discover the stone rolled away and they encountered 'a young man dressed in a white robe' who told them Jesus had been raised from the dead. As the scripture passage says, they were filled with terror and amazement.

Our harsh world can make the good news of the resurrection a challenge to believe. Regardless of which specific Gospel account of the empty tomb and the resurrection we hear, we can well imagine the shock and confusion and fear that was evoked within the first witnesses in those first encounters at the empty tomb. Likely their first thought was that the body had been stolen. All kinds of thoughts must have run through their minds.

There was, in the moment, too much to assimilate, for anyone to immediately begin celebrating with joy what was actually unfolding. They didn't yet understand or expect, that Jesus would rise from the dead. The horrific events that had taken place happened quickly, quite unexpectedly, and very much fit the image of the shepherd being struck and the sheep being scattered. What they had just experienced was profoundly disorienting and what they were now experiencing, by any human standard, was intense shock and trauma. The faith that had been nurtured under Jesus' tender care was all of a sudden, for a short time, in limbo. What they were about to experience had been inconceivable to their human experience up to this point.

In John's Gospel, which we will hear tomorrow, Mary lingers alone near the tomb in her grief, and Jesus calls her by name.

From this we are reminded that even if we are grieving, disillusioned with life, or filled with fear or shame at something in our own life, God never stops calling us. It is most often in our deepest most helpless and vulnerable moments that we find God or, God finds us. He knows how to address the deepest part of us. And when we are found, there is nothing else to do but be grateful and then begin living for the one who created us by giving ourselves away as Christ did.

The only way we can give ourselves away as Christ did, is to use the moments we have to live like He did, and the hours and days in the future will take care of themselves.

The joy of the apostles and of the close friends of Jesus would eventually overflow. In very short order, these followers would move from the depths of despair and alienation to the joyous exuberance of renewal and rebirth. Something profoundly significant and life changing had happened within each one of their hearts. Jesus, their leader and friend, had broken the chains of death through the power of God. Death, the last and greatest enemy, had been overcome in Him. What was unfathomable and seemingly unattainable had become reality. All was not lost. In fact, the opposite was true.

Things had gone exactly the way Scripture, and Jesus Himself, said they would go. And the apostles and close followers would soon discover that they were now being prepared for mission, the mission to carry on what Jesus had begun. Their hearts and minds had been freed.

The joy of the apostles is meant to be ours too. It doesn't immediately remove from us the fear of death, for we still have to go through it. But it was by going through it that Jesus overcame it. So it is for us who believe in Him.

Without Easter, the story of Jesus would have been little more than a flare in the night. Darkness would still have had the last word.

But with the Resurrection we know that the darkness did not have the last word.

In spite of the world situation we live in today, the political and religious polarizations, the violence and oppression, the racism, and the pandemic, let us not be afraid to bask in the bright light the Risen Christ has brought into the world of darkness and death.

There is much more going on than meets the eye. As we have seen in the events in Scripture these past few days and in the days and weeks to come, the loving work of our God continues in spite of what seemed on the surface as total failure. Our narrative must give way to God's greater narrative for us.

The message here is, give faith and God a chance to work with us and transform our seeming disasters and our pains and losses into something unimaginably life giving and beautiful.

So as we enter into this celebration of the Resurrection of our Lord, may God give each one of us the grace to trust in Him. May we never allow anything to so fill us with sorrow that we dismiss or forget the joy of Easter, the joy of Christ Risen from the dead. Amen.