Dear friends, on this most holy night, in which our Lord Jesus passed over from death to life, we are joined as one body to move from darkness to light.

This is the night. The Easter Vigil, this most ancient of holy days is rich in symbolism, saturated with the word of God, and is the principal celebration of the resurrection of our Lord. Throughout the ages, it has been in this service that countless saints have proclaimed, “Alleluia, Christ is risen!”

There is fire and incense. The ancient chant of the Exultet is a proclamation of joy and salvation and has roots in the first centuries of Christianity. Its language is ancient, its theology embedded in the world of the time, expresses the meaning of Easter. It invites heaven, earth and the church to rejoice, to exult, in this feast. It recalls Israel's Exodus and proclaims for us, a new exodus, baptism in Christ Jesus.

In our Baptism, new Christians cross through water from slavery to freedom and all the church shares in the rising of Christ. The Great Vigil of Easter is the most blessed of festivals, telling out the story, our story……Passover, baptism, resurrection, and redemption. In joy we offer God our Pascal candle, a pillar of fire, mingling with the lights of heaven, a candle which will meet Christ, the Morning Star, whose resurrection forever dispels darkness.

This is the night when the gloom of sin is so close in proximity to the resurrected Christ that it cannot survive the brilliance. Darkness cannot possibly thrive amidst the Alleluias! And, the truth is, even now, even with our jubilant songs and exuberant ringing of bells, we are just at the beginning of waking to, and walking in the light.

As the women walked toward the tomb on the first day of the week it is not yet fully light, the spark of dawn just beginning to appear in the early morning sky. They go to the tomb in the cold of that Easter morning to perform the preparation of Jesus’ body …….laden down with their spices…… and their sorrow……. and their broken hearts, to complete the preparation of the body of their fallen Lord.

I imagine that they walked together in silence down to the place where he was laid. There was nothing more for them to tell each other….no story besides the grief and loss they shared. In their grief, they have forgotten all else. There is only the silence in the gray morning.

As they come close, they become confused….. the stone covering the entrance to the tomb is rolled away and inside there is no body to be found. They are startled, struck with surprise and terror by the appearance of two dazzling figures, angels, asking them most outlandish question and making absurd proclamations. WHY DO YOU LOOK FOR THE LIVING AMONG THE DEAD? HE IS NOT HERE, HE IS RISEN!

We, like the witnesses to the empty tomb are perhaps disoriented.

And why wouldn't they be. Why wouldn't we be? This is not how the story goes. The dead are the dead. That’s the way it is in the world.

The empty tomb and the dazzling messengers leave the women terrified, their faces pressed down into the dirt, desperate for a light to see their way out of the darkness of grief and confusion.

Surprisingly, the women are not told let go of their fear, as they are in other gospels. Instead, the angel reminds them of their own story, their own time with Jesus, ……Their words bring to mind how Jesus told his followers he must suffer and die and be raised again on the third day. Memory is such a powerful thing. As their grief-fueled amnesia lifts, they remember his words, that he has told them of his rising from the dead, and they return to the disciples to tell what they have witnessed.

Luke tells us, when the eleven disciples hear what the women have to say, they consider it an “idle tale”, and no one believes them.

But, the actual Greek that is used is more accurately translated as “the rantings of a person suffering from delirium.” So it is not as though Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary, the mother of James, and the other women casually strolled in and said – “we went to the tomb and Jesus was nowhere to be found.”

What they had to tell was frightening and thrilling, wonderful and weird, and beyond all imagination. There would have been light and energy sparking in that place; voices raised in overflowing excitement! So much so that, though the scripture says that “no one believed them”, Peter found himself running to the tomb to see it in person!

And what he found, the burial wrapping, scraps of cloth lying on the ground amazed him. But we aren’t told if that scene convinced him of anything more than the fact that Jesus’ body was no longer there. The translation in the New International Bible says that Peter “*walked away wondering to himself what had happened”*.

The discovery of an empty tomb does not immediately lead to a change in perspective for all who meet there. No doubt, *we need not look far* from that cavern hewn in the rock to find death lurking, even thriving. Perhaps the question for us today is, *“Where is death in the midst of our lives, and how do we open ourselves to resurrection and new life?”*

* Where are those places where we have become willing to live in the stench of death, when life is being offered?
* What long dead ideas and ideals are we holding on to?
* Where can we offer peace in this time where there seems only to be division and negativity?
* How can we speak truth even when it means admitting our own complicity in those diseases of spirit….inequality, racism, oppression?

It’s interesting to note that none of the Gospels narrate the actual Resurrection. Jesus is in the tomb, and then he isn’t. In Matthew’s gospel Pilate, in a move of self-protection, even posts guards to prevent the followers of Jesus from stealing his body. And yet, there is still an empty tomb. This is the mystery of God’s work. That vacant grave is the greatest gift of all.

What the grieving women receive when they come to the barren tomb is a seed of hope. That hope is bolstered by the memory of their experience being with Jesus…his words, his actions, his love.

Episcopal priest Bill Osborne writes, “*What is hope? Hope is not the same as optimism. Optimism is based on signs that things are going well…..Hope, on the other hand, does not spring from success. Hope comes in the midst of the worst kind of gloom, the kind of gloom the world presents to us. Hope arises not from the situation we find ourselves in, but from something outside of us. Hope is a glimmer of light flickering in the darkness. Hope is a seed buried in the ground that finally bursts forth with new life. “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit.”*

Hope springs forth from an empty tomb. What we are given is hope. What we are given is Resurrection.

Holy is this night, when wickedness is put to flight, and our sin is washed away. This is the night when our innocence is restored, when the doors of possibility are flung wide open. This is the night when we, who stand near this marvelous and Holy flame, are truly blessed as earth and heaven are joined and we are reconciled to God.

Tonight, the bonds of death and hell are broken. Tonight is the night we die to self. Now, we are alive, made new in Christ Jesus, no longer foreigners or strangers to heaven, but citizens with all creation.

Resurrection is not the property of the past*. "Easter did not just happen one morning 2,000 years ago, and it does not happen one day a year; it happens over and over again through the life of the church and the life of those who would follow Jesus. It happens after the chocolate and jelly beans are gone; it happens when we know that love and hope have died. Then and now, powers and principalities say no to resistance, but God says yes to life. Death does not have the last word. Each new Christian generation has Easter experiences that demand the absurd proclamation, 'He is alive!'”[[1]](#footnote-1)*

Alleluia, Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!

1. Laurel Dykstra. <https://sojo.net/magazine/may-2008/creator-life> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)