

Easter Vigil Sermon 2021

Guest Preacher: The Rev. Martha Wallace

It began in darkness. The breath of God swept over the waters in the void, and what God spoke came into being. God said, "Let there be light," and there was light and matter and energy, nebulae, galaxies, stars, planets and on earth, life of every conceivable variety, the whole wondrous creation out of nothing but God cells. Words fail us. Astonishing, incredible, they just aren't big enough to cover our amazement when we contemplate creation.

Then fast forward some millions of years and we glimpsed Moses, arm outstretched over the Red Sea. And this time the breath of God is a strong wind, clearing a path through the water as the Hebrew people hurry across in terror and amazement with a wall of water on each side and Pharaoh's army hot on their heels. As the last of the Hebrew people climbs the bank on the opposite shore, Moses lowers his staff and the water comes crashing back down, their pursuers vanishing beneath the sea. Now there is nothing behind them but water, waves and wind. Astonishing, unbelievable. Even those who came through that sea on dry land must have had a hard time believing it.

Fast forward several thousand more years to find Mary Magdalene and two other women arriving at Jesus' tomb at dawn on the third day after his death to find the stone rolled back and the tomb empty. An angelic visitor in dazzling white greets them inside the tomb.

"Don't be alarmed." Yeah, like they were going to be able to control that. "You're looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He has been raised. He's not here. Look, there is the place where they laid him. But go and tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him. Just as he told you."

The women, understandably seized by terror and amazement, fled from the tomb. The final words of Mark's gospel hang in the air. And they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid of...

That's right, Mark's gospel ends here right in the middle of a sentence, somehow the final page or pages had been lost. But we know from other gospel accounts that when the women finally were able to tell Peter and the others, no one believed them. I'm sure they could scarcely believe it themselves. The women who set out that Easter morning were not looking for something astonishing. They had no doubt what they would find in Jesus' tomb. They had been right there at the foot of the cross. Jesus was dead and with him all their hopes and dreams. Yet when they arrived at the tomb that first Easter morning, Jesus was not where they expected him to be. Just as Jesus refused to be defined by human expectations during his life, Jesus was not confined by human expectations after death.

Do you see a pattern emerging? We can always count on God to find a way where there seems to be no way. I guess I should say, to make a way where there seems to be no way. We can always count on God for something unexpected and astonishing. Something so wonderful it's difficult to imagine, much less believe.

The reaction of Mary Magdalene and the other women, like most of the witnesses to Jesus' post resurrection appearances was joy mixed with fear, and rightly so. Resurrection just is not part of the expected order of things. However much we might want someone we love to have not died, we really would find it most upsetting if someone we loved who had died a few days earlier suddenly got up and started walking around and talking to us.

Resurrection defies what we think of as natural order. No wonder people confronting it were disbelieving and even afraid. But as many of the gospel accounts tell us, their fear was mixed with joy because this was, after all, not some walking dead zombie out of a horror movie, but a real live flesh and blood Jesus whom they loved. For those first witnesses, even though they must have been terrified, their joy when they did see their Lord alive again must have been profound.

On this most holy night, we try to recapture that joy and that amazement and maybe the fear and trembling of those first witnesses to the resurrection experiences, and we try to push down any doubts that we might have that get in the way of our joy, because we want to believe. We do. But we are children of the Enlightenment, and it's so difficult to imagine how it can be true that Jesus really did rise from the dead.

To counter these doubts, to bolster our faith, tonight we recount many tales, too wonderful to believe, but which nonetheless did occur according to our most sacred stories, passed down from generation to generation. Unbelievable and astonishing as it may be, we have a God who can and did create universes and all that they can take out of nothing but God's self. We worship a God who can and did intervene in a most miraculous way and seemingly supernatural way to rescue his people from oppression in Egypt.

Actually, most of the things that God does seem to upset what we think of as the natural order of things. Certainly most of the things Jesus taught fly in the face of how we think the world works or how we experience the world. His teaching always turns our expectations upside down. And while it may be true that some things have to be seen to be believed, I think it is also true that some things have to be believed in order to be seen.

This is the night when with our Easter eyes, our eyes of faith, we can watch God turn what we think of as the natural order upside down to raise Jesus from the dead, bringing new life and new hope to all of us. In fact, the way we Christians understand it, this life beyond death was not a flouting of God's created order, but the fulfillment of it, the ushering in of a whole new order of things far beyond human expectation, even human imagination.

Resurrection defies our ability to understand it, try as we might. It bursts out of all our attempts to put closure on it. So tonight, we stand in the middle of a mystery, a mystery we take on faith, and we are filled with joy for this is not just a story about a historical Jesus, a religious hero who once lived. It is a story about an unpredictably, incomprehensibly, still alive Jesus. And it is an unfinished story.

At Easter, we discovered that behind the universe is a God of love who is capable of bringing life, hope and possibility to everyone, both in this life and in a dimension beyond. And it changes everything. Because Christ is risen, then no failure or loss or tsunami or war or pandemic can ever be the last word. God can bring life out of any tomb.

Resurrection is not just something that happened to Jesus, it is also happening to us. In baptism we die with Christ to our old self. In baptism, we are raised with Christ to a new life, a life beyond our expectations, beyond our imagination.

The tomb could not contain Jesus. Nothing can contain Jesus. He is out there in front of us as the angel told the women in the tomb that Easter morning. So, do as the angel basically told them to do. "Plunge back into your lives and you'll meet the Lord for yourself soon."

And we can, too. In a worship service or on the street, in a struggle at home or at the office once we can go back there again, in the care of a friend or of a stranger or in a call to make a difference in some way, we can find the strength and courage we really need to live. And that's the Easter difference, because Christ is alive, and Christ is loose in the world.

So, in our great vigil tonight, we are not just remembering some past glory, but celebrating Jesus' amazing and astonishing ongoing life, a life in which we can and do share. It's a life that is unexpected and scary and wonderful, full of joy and fear and trembling. Jesus is alive. And because he is alive, so are we. Alleluia. Christ is risen. And the people respond, "The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia."