

Great Vigil of Easter Year B 2009

Alleluia, the Lord is risen. He is risen indeed. Xpistos avesti, aleethws avesti Alleluia, the Lord is risen, He is risen indeed. Alleluia. AMEN.

Happy Easter and it is a joy to welcome you here to celebrate the great Vigil, the telling of some, many, but not all, the stories of God's wonderful actions for people throughout history. While we as Christians mark one of those actions as most special, the sweep of the stories reminds of us of the range, power, and involvement of the Holy One and Creator with our ancestors and us. Like any set of family stories and memories they take a while to tell and hear, but after any family reunion we're always filled with a little impatience with the length and number of the old stories and delight to have heard so many and to know ourselves as included in them.

These stories lead to our particular family's account of the death and surprising yet for us here and now, the familiar and expected resurrection of Jesus our Saviour. After hearing about God's creation of the world and more, Mark tells us that Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James, and Salome went to the tomb where they'd only so recently buried their friend, leader, and hope. They were there to anoint the body and to grieve. The stone was so large, they'd worried about how to roll it away, but it had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb they saw a young man, sitting and they were alarmed. He said to them not to be alarmed, He told them, "Jesus has been raised; he is not here. Go tell the disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you." them that Jesus was not there, that he'd gone on to Galilee where they'd see him. They fled and, being afraid, told no one.

It's a panicky story, but they didn't doubt the young man or even try to identify him. They didn't know what to make of what he told them, and they rushed away without asking questions— or maybe

people didn't ask questions all the time. This account conveys the puzzlement and terror they felt, but not doubt.

We can imagine ourselves there with them, racing away and having more and more questions as we headed for the disciples and Galilee. We, however, know the other accounts, the one from Matthew in your leaflet, which I incorrectly placed there, where two of these women encountered Jesus, recognized him, touched him, and worshiped him. On this Markan first morning, they didn't have that particular comfort or encounter. All the accounts make up our experience. We've heard them all before and it only makes limited sense to pretend to ourselves that this is the first time we're hearing this and that we are the ones to decide what is there, what is real, what is true.

We add the wonderful Epistle, which explains that any of us baptized are baptized into this death of Christ and so into his eternal resurrection, his life everlasting. We could have chosen to place the Renewal of vows with the long biblical accounts telling our family history. One can rightly put those renewed vows before the Gospel and homily, putting our story with the long accounts of our forebears, OR, one can put them here, after the Gospel. It's less dramatic here perhaps. The baptismal vows or baptisms are done here in the light, rather than in the mysterious and slightly romantic dark that we experience before the declaration that it is Easter; Jesus is risen. For me that drama puts me in the line of our Jewish forebears responding to one, after another, of God's interactions with people.

Placing the renewal of vows instead after the Gospel, particularly in the Markan year, puts my faith on the line, to declare aloud, to re-enlist, to respond in fear and amazement, but yet with faith enough to renew my vows. Perhaps that is an overly personal way to take the choice of where to put the vows, but to renew vows can only be personal. While we do it together, communally, each question is to us as an individual. We were each baptized as an individual believer and we can only claim faith in Jesus Christ, the Risen Lord, personally. I've been told repeatedly that

Episcopalians don't really "take Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour," but we must do that and we do do that. Only each of us can speak for ourselves on this matter, and in the renewing of vows that we'll do together in a minute, causes us to speak as individuals.

If you were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, or Salome, do you believe in Jesus Christ? If you are just the person you are, I am, any of us is, tries to be, hopes to be, do you renew your commitment to Jesus Christ? Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? Do you flee from the tomb in terror and amazement, and say nothing?

We answer those questions together, but also as individuals and we answer them in continuity with those in covenant with God through the ages. We continue in God's covenantal relationship, but we renew our commitment to Jesus Christ as a direct response to the Easter Gospel, even one as fearful and tentative as tonight's Markan Gospel. We hear the Good News proclaimed and that requires us to recommit ourselves in word and then action, at the first Eucharist of Easter. We respond in good company as people, as people with fear, amazement, but we know that Jesus has risen and guarantees us, however emphatically or tepidly we do respond, that he is waiting for us in paradise. We renew our vows again as an affirmation to Jesus of his work, pledge, sacrifice, and covenant with us. We renew them in thanksgiving of this Good News.