

## **Easter Vigil: April 8, 2023**

Romans 6:3-11

Psalm 114

Matthew 28:1-10

The Rev. Nat Johnson

Jesus' crucifixion caused cataclysmic disruptions to the world. The sun was hidden for three hours; the earth shook, and the Temple curtain was torn in two at the moment Jesus died; rocks and tombs split open, the saints were resurrected – all signs that the guards keeping watch at the cross interpreted to mean Jesus was indeed “the Son of God.” Even in death, the religious elite feared Jesus and his followers, so they negotiated the tomb be sealed and guarded. Best not to give the disciples an opportunity to steal the body and tell everyone Jesus had been raised, they argued to Pilate.

After the sabbath, Mary and Mary walk to the tomb. They, along with some other women, were followers of Jesus. They had traveled with him, ministered to and with him. They watched his crucifixion, sat opposite the tomb after he was buried, and now, in the predawn hours of the third day, they come to the tomb. They want to see, to inspect, to try to make sense of what happened. And even in the sadness and confusion, there are echoes of longing reverberating in their ears and their hearts. “I will be handed over and killed,” Jesus told them, “And on the third day be raised.”

As they approached the tomb, the earth shook as an angel descended and rolled away the stone. In the kind of joke that's undergirded by the most serious and somber reality, the angel sat atop the stone that had sealed the tomb. “Do not be afraid,” the angel said. “I know what you are looking for, but you will not find him here. His life cannot be made impossible by death; God's life cannot be contained by a sealed tomb.” The women came to look, to seek understanding, and they were met with an unsettling invitation to “Come and see!” See how nothing can thwart the power of God, how all attempts at security and certainty are shattered in the uncontainable life of God.<sup>i</sup>

As the women looked inside the empty tomb, they pressed up against the boundary of life that we call death and discovered that God was doing something new.<sup>ii</sup> Where the finality of impossibility once laid, the empty tomb demonstrated the open-ended possibility of God's creative and life-giving love. The emptiness of the tomb both exposed the futility of human efforts to kill that which it fears and shattered the pretense of the stability of certainty, particularly as it was exercised by the powerful elite. No human or earthly power could render impossible the possibility of God.

“Go and tell,” the angel commissioned the women. “Go and tell those whose confusion and fear cause them to hide, whose betrayal and abandonment weighs on them like the shroud of death; go and tell them that Jesus will meet them, will go ahead of them, and welcome them once again into the arms fellowship and communion.” Without hesitation, Mary and Mary went as they were sent. Awe and wonder filled their hearts – they were confronted and embraced by a mystery beyond words, which bore the fruit of transformation. Fear and joy mingled and in their going they embodied a new identity grounded in a new purpose. They were apostles, sent to preach the good news of Jesus' resurrection.

Their transformation was more than just a change in title from disciple to apostle. Their transformation gave them eyes to see and ears to hear the face and voice of the risen Jesus. In his sudden appearance, they understood that his presence would abide with them and though he would go ahead of his siblings to Galilee, he would nevertheless accompany them in their vocation as the sent, empowering Mary and Mary's witness and testimony. Their task was not to explain what happened, but to testify to the radical transformation and reordering of the world in light of the divine mystery of resurrection. Nothing could thwart the power of new life, even its inexplicable nature. In the risen Christ, all that once seemed fixed and immovable is reconfigured into a new trajectory of possibility and hope.

“There they will see me,” says the risen Lord. “There, at the intersection of awe and joy, there at the place where longing meets fulfillment, there at the crossroads of surprise and expectation, you will meet me as the bearer of new life. And there, in that moment, you will be transformed.” Drawn into the very life of new creation that Jesus bears, his disciples become members of his resurrected body and manifestations of divine action in the world.<sup>iii</sup> Tonight, as we celebrate Jesus' Passover from death to life, we proclaim that in Jesus God chose and chooses to not be God without us. His incarnation, his life and ministry, his death and resurrection all point to the abiding reality that God is, indeed, *with* us, that God became and continues to become one with us. In all that Jesus did in his time on earth, he became what we are and in all that he did, he communicated something of the divine into human being, so that we might also become what he is.

My prayer for us tonight, dear People of Grace, is that we would embrace the mystery of the empty tomb in such a way that all the impossibilities of its darkness are transformed into the creative possibilities of the divine womb. Yes, the Lord *is* risen; Christ is risen indeed! *Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!*

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<sup>i</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *Working Preacher*, 2019.

<sup>ii</sup> Michael Fitzpatrick, *Journey with Jesus*, 2023.

<sup>iii</sup> Fitzpatrick.