

Saturday, April 15, 2017

(Matthew 28: 1 - 10)

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

During the Lenten season, we have focused on repenting and inward reflection. Those solemn themes and feelings, continuing into Maundy Thursday with the silent stripping of the altar.

Finally, Good Friday arrived and we passed through the Passion of Jesus again. The public humiliation. Trial by mob violence for blood. Sadistic torture. Unspeakable and intense, searing physical pain. No relief during hours of a torturous, agonizing, barbaric struggle to death. And so...here we are...at our gospel reading for today. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary...at dawn of the first day of the week after the Sabbath...are heading to the tomb. They are on the way to perform the ritual of anointing his body, and they are going to do it out of a sense of duty.

I often urge you all to use your imagination. So, today, in my imagination, I see these women. There is NO doubt in my heart that they did NOT want to go...overwhelmed with their grief and their loss for the one that they love. But they went anyway...because, when we are in the shock of despair, deepest lost, the lowest point in our lives, do not we often push ourselves to go on within the routine of our lives? Looking to find comfort anywhere? Hoping that some familiar activity will carry us through our numbness until we can get to normal?

I see the tears streaking down their faces, otherwise silent except for muffled sobs and cries, slowing proceeding to the tomb. Slowly proceeding to bottomless loss, endless grief and loneliness. Their despair was driven not only by the death of the one they loved the greatest. But it was also driven by the total confusion of what the last three years with him really meant. What was it all about? Why did it end like this? What now will happen to us all? I believe that they felt panic amidst despair.

OK....now...**in one word**....answer these questions. . .

Why were they grieving? When faced with uncertainty, what is one of the most common emotional reaction of all humanity? What is an absolute, most natural core of **all of all human** interaction, whether it is a relationship of one-on-one going back to the days of Cain and Able...right to the very fundamentals of relations between nations?

FEAR.

In our innermost core, this is what drives us. All of us. From our earliest childhood. I am coming up to a birthday but...I'll tell you what...I remember like yesterday being a five year old in my own bedroom. No night light, and staring night after night at the two sliding closet doors...absolutely SURE that there were MONSTERS in there!! During the day, I would play in my room..totally forgetting the closet completely. But, at night, a streetlight helped me see the left door, but the right one....whoa! Lots of nights, I saw the right door move on its own!!

You know what I am talking about. How many times have kids climbed into bed with you because of some nightmares? As we get older, we lose our fear of “monsters”...or, do we? It matters on how we define the word, “monsters”. Being afraid does not go away when we get older, does it?

In preparation for tonight’s service, I noticed right away the great emphasis on our use of light during the Great Vigil of Easter. We each have our own candles that we have used to this point, and we have the Pascal Candle up here. Why? Because we need the light to see. For those of us with sight, we need light...not so much in order to see, but in a deeper way, in order to be reassured.

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary on that morning were in that natural place of all humans: **they were afraid.** Afraid of death. Afraid not only for what the death of Jesus meant to them, but also afraid about their own deaths to come.

We are ALL afraid of death. No matter how great or how rotten we think our quality of life is, at least we know what we have...and we have learned how to deal with it. For many, even just existing through a bleak, unremarkable life...or even a tormented one of abuse and pain...may be better than the personal terror of not knowing what is next.

My late father comes to mind. I am reminded tonight that, with the renewal of our baptismal covenant, I think that my father last attended a church service at my own infant baptism. Very late in his life, I was visiting with him and, right out of the blue and without any instigation on my part, he asked, “Do you believe in life after death?” The suddenness and complexity of that discussion caught me completely off guard, so I did not answer but only shook my head yes. And, in saying that I was among other fools in having that belief, he summed up his general statement of human life:

“You are born. You live. You die. You are buried. And you are forgotten.”

THAT was the fear in the grief and despair of Mary and Mary that morning.

THAT....is the very essence of who and what we are....

The great vigil has begun. These women, along with Joseph of Arimethea and Nicodemus, do not yet know the end of the story, but we do. We feel the coming glory of the Light. In our waiting, our anticipation, we hear words of stories past. We remember covenants made by a merciful and loving God. We recite ancient psalms, and all these make the long vigil bearable:

Is it possible that we have totally misunderstood death? The Great Vigil is the time for such questions. There is so much that we left unsaid, so much love we had wanted to show the beloved who is now dead. Is there really a possibility for second chances?

We wait. Anticipate. We tell each other the age-old stories once again. We look to the promises and to God’s covenant of love and redemption. The darkness of fear...the fear of not knowing or understanding the meaning of our lives...is not forever.

Which brings us to this night. This night is when we first see the light of Christ in the darkness. Suddenly, there is a flicker of light on this one candle, which shines in the darkness. And this light is passed to each of us, a gift of God's light that we can hold in our own hands: a reminder to us all that we are in fact made in the image of God. And God's image is light, and life, and love, and it is good. And if it is good, so are we...as we should dare to be.

These are the details of life that we often overlook or simply cannot see because of all the details of our lives. It may be that sometimes we can only see this light in the darkness. It may be that sometimes we need to go deeper into the darkness to see, to find, to rediscover this light of Christ that God has placed inside of us in our baptism. To help us focus on what really matters:

That there was a time when the breath of God blew on us and filled us with God's spirit.

That some of the fire from this holy candle was placed in our hearts the day of our own baptism.

That this light has shined since it first was spoken into being by God's thundering command, "Let there be light!"

That this light shines in the darkness and that the darkness has never, ever, not once, overcome it.

That the Sign of the Cross has been traced on our foreheads sealing us as Christ's own forever.

But, I am getting ahead of myself. Let us use our imagination again, and stand with Mary and Mary at the tomb. Hear the message from the gospel with them.

Run with them away from the tomb, quickly and with great joy!! With God's help, we will try to understand it in the weeks to come. But...for now, tonight...it is enough to shake off our fear...once and for all...as we continue in the company of saints, the millions over the centuries who have become the Body of Christ. Let us run ahead...quickly and with great joy...and , in using the words of Peter:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ! By his great mercy, we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead!”

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.