Homily
April 20, 2019
Easter Vigil
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Exodus 14.10-31; 15:20-21
Isaiah 55.1-11
Ezekiel 37.1-14
Romans 6.3-11
Luke 24.1-12

Why are you here? This question I have put to you is a serious one. But it is not so because I think you may have other things to do; you probably do — it is a Saturday night, after all. The question is a serious one because, according to Luke, in essence, it is the same question the angels addressed to the women who went to Jesus' tomb after his burial, that is, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" So, why is it that you are here?

Why were they there, those Marys who went to Jesus' tomb early on the first day of the week? John writes that Mary Magdalene went to the tomb; she was alone, and with no motive — she just went to the tomb. Matthew tells us only that they went "to see the tomb." Mark and Luke give us a little more information: the women took spices to anoint Jesus — in other words, they were going to complete the burial ritual; Jesus was dead, after all. But other than that, we know little.

What may we surmise then? Well, these various women had been with Jesus for some years. We know that one of the was Mary of Magdala, who Jesus had redeemed from a life of sin. The others are more shadowy figures. They may have been among those women who had supported Jesus and his followers as they travelled about Palestine; Luke tells us that they had been with him in Galilee, In any event, these women had clearly held Jesus in some esteem; he had had a profound impact on their lives. For now they were either coming to pay their respects, or to perform a final caring act for him.

In either event, they thought they knew where they would find Jesus' body. It seemed so simple, however sad it was. The man who had been their life for many months was dead; they knew where he was buried. A fitting gesture, then, was to anoint his body — to prepare it for eternity. They knew where they could go. They knew where they could go to recall what had been. They knew where they could go to remember what he had said, what he had done. Ah, those were good times — well, maybe except that last week — they were good times, but now they're over. All that was left was the memories.

So they go; they go to where they expected to find Jesus' body. What they found, however, was nothing of the sort. The tomb they anticipated was destroyed by an earthquake. And, not only was the tomb destroyed; Jesus' body was not there. Instead, sitting there was an individual in dazzling white clothes. And this angel tells the women that Jesus in not there; he has been raised. Matthew then tells us that the women turned and ran — with fear and great joy. And the they ran into Jesus; he wasn't in that tomb after all. And Jesus tells them that he will meet them again in Galilee, away from all the established "holy" places, back at the center of his pre-crucifixion activity.

This is Easter, my friends! The women go to the tomb — where they expect to find Jesus and h is not there. The death of Jesus was not the final story. The shrine they had hoped to establish was destroyed in an earthquake; Jesus was not to be enshrined; he was not confined by death. And they were afraid. Now what? Before the encounter with the empty tomb, they knew what to expect. Time with Jesus had been fantastic. But it was over — so they thought. They had probably thought to go back to their lives, lives enriched by having known Jesus, but somewhat emptier because of his absence. He was dead, after all. But now?

Now this is Easter, my friends! He was not dead. He was not dead then, and, as Christians for two thousand years have believed, he is not dead now. "Alleluia! Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!" is the great and ancient Easter greeting. So how does that make you feel? In other words, what are you here, now? Are you afraid? Are you filled with great joy? Or is it a little of both?

Parker Palmer, who writes on issues of spirituality, relates the story of medieval Irish monk who died and was buried in the walls of his monastery. The monks heard noises with that wall one day. They removed the stones and found their brother monk alive and well. In the re-telling of his near-death experience, the monk told them what he had seen and learned. But there was a problem: everything he said was contrary to the teachings of the church. The brothers were so distressed that they pushed the monk back into the wall and sealed it forever.

For those monks, their brother was safer dead than alive. Jesus was also safer dead than alive. It was true then. It is true now. For we think we know what Jesus asks of us: you know, "Be good — sometimes," "Give the church a little money." We think we know what Jesus can do for us: "O Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz." We think we know what we can believe about Jesus: "Well, according to the scholars, he only really said about a quarter of the stuff recorded in

the the Gospels". These are hopes and beliefs, and we keep them in our hearts and minds. That Jesus we all love, that we have enshrined in liturgies and places — both schools and chapel - that Jesus is safer dead than alive.

But this is Easter, my friends. "This is the night, when Christ broke the bonds of death and hell, and rose victorious from the grave." Of the two certainties — death and taxes — at least one, death, is no longer certain. And that is indeed cause for fear. For without the fear of death to rule us, we no longer have the security of thinking that we must spend our lives protecting those same lives. Without the fear of death, we no longer have a reason to hoard our wealth. We no longer have a reason to save our time. We no longer have cause to hold fast to ideas and ways of thinking that oppress those who might challenge our way of living. With the resurrection, our comfort level is gone.

But yet, it is also increased. We have journeyed through the Red Sea. We have welcomed Alex and Eva into our community through baptism. We have renewed our baptismal vows. We have taken our places in that great history of salvation, that great mystery of redemption. As Paul tells the Romans, "we have been buried with Christ in baptism, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead, so we too might walk in newness of life." We have pledged to follow a living Jesus, challenged and encouraged by his resurrection. Challenged and encouraged to resist evil and injustice in all forms. Challenged and encouraged to respect every human person's dignity. We have been challenged and encouraged to know that by losing our life were will find it. We have been challenged and encouraged to give our lives to a risen Lord, not some idea, however, pious or politically correct.

On this night, we ware challenged to ask "Why are we here, seeking the living among the dead?" That is cause for fear. Do we come to the shrine of a pious memory? Do we come to pay homage to a noble idea? Are we more comfortable with the dead? Or, on this night of nights — this Easter — do we recognize that all of our "-isms" and "-ologies" that serve to keep Christ entombed have been rolled away with the stone. On this night, when all who believe in Christ are delivered from the gloom of sin, we are encouraged to know that "Yea, Christ our hope is arisen; to Galilee he will go before us." To "Galilee", where it all began, and were it begins again; the place of new beginnings, new ministries, new life, Christ will go before us. In "Galilee," Christ will meet us. That is cause for great joy.

Alleluia, Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia.