

Easter Vigil - 2016

During Holy Week we spend a lot of time recounting the story of Jesus, especially as it pertains to the last days of his life.

But on the night of the Easter Vigil, the story we tell stretched back to the dawn of creation, and fast-forwards through to the resurrection and beyond.

I say "beyond," because it is no longer a static story of what took place in the past. It continues this very moment.

All of us stand at the entrance of the tomb this very evening, like the three women and Peter, trying to make sense of what we see.

Some of us stand here for the first time as those newly embracing the faith, peering into a surprisingly empty space and asking, "Dare I, even now, believe this news?"

Some are new only to the community of the church, and stare into the unknowable commitment they have made and wonder, "What will I find here when the morning comes?"

For most of us, who have stood here again and again over many years, the darkness of the cave may hold less terror, but no less wonder.

After all these years, the tomb is still full of unanswered questions, hair-raising doubts, and mystery. Our

whole sense of what is really real is in play.

What will we find when we come looking for Jesus?

Imagine what each of the characters of the gospel story found. This can help us situate for ourselves what we are hoping for.

Mary Magdalene had known Jesus, first as the man who freed her from her demons, and later as her Lord and friend.

When she went with her friends carrying spices to the tomb at dawn, she hoped only to return a favor to one whom she loved.

But she got more than she ever bargained for.

She got an empty tomb. She got angels in dazzling robes.

She got a gospel of resurrection and a commission to proclaim it!

Joanna had made an investment in the ministry of Jesus. Literally an investment: she was one of the women whose resources funded the out-of-pocket expenses of Jesus and his mission.

She was the wife of King Herod's steward, and as such an unlikely candidate for discipleship.

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One must wonder what it did for her marriage to be a known supporter of a rival king.

Joanna made her choices, and they brought her all the way to the empty tomb.

Mary, most likely the mother of James, son of Alphaeus, the future leader of the Jerusalem community, made the choice to take the risk and be where the action was, where unsuspecting new life has just emerged from death.

As a mother she understands that no life is delivered without pain and sacrifice; but life from crucifixion?

What could she take from an empty tomb? A birth of unimaginable hope!

Peter brings up the rear, maybe no less incredulous than the others when they hear the women's testimony, but at least willing to seek verification of their story.

He's late to the party, sees no angels, hears no pronouncements. But he sees the tomb, the stone, the cloths, and the kernel of faith is planted through his efforts.

We all come to the tomb tonight: the sinners, the investors, the life bearers, the latecomers. Each of us arrives with a dream, and comes away with more than we could even hope for.

Ultimately, the empty tomb alone cannot proclaim too much beyond saying what is not the case: Jesus' dead body is not there.

If it were, that would have ended things right then and there.

But to find the tomb empty means that we cannot simply put the matter to rest.

We have to remain open to what might happen next, which is good practice in any life which seeks to have God be a part of it.

The empty tomb is the best symbol we have for the necessity of staying tuned, to see what God has next in store for us; to not foreclose on reality in favor of the comfortable familiar.

If it is true that Jesus has been raised from the dead, from the very dead!, all the impossibilities we have already taken as fact, must give way to the creativity of the one who has already marked an end to death, and proclaimed in the person of Jesus that life will have the last word.

As we come forward this evening to profess our baptismal promises, either for the first time, or once again with feeling, we make our commitment to the God of the living, and ask that he remove from our lives and from the world, all that still reeks of death, so that the life of God will be all in all.