

Easter Vigil
Matt. 28:1-10

Disciples of the Empty Tomb*

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The Church of the Transfiguration
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Alleluia, Christ is risen! Alleluia, Christ is risen! Alleluia, Christ is risen!

Tonight is the Easter Vigil, which is what the great fourth-century theologian Augustine of Hippo called “the mother of all vigils.” Tonight is the mass of all masses. Tonight is the feast of all feasts. And tonight is the celebration of all celebrations. The Easter Vigil is not only the culmination of our Holy Week journey together, but it is the summit of the entire liturgical year.

And no wonder, because this is the night on which we celebrate the empty tomb of Christ Jesus, our Lord. This is the night on which we celebrate the hope and victory of the resurrection over the despair and defeat of the cross. And this is the night on which we recognize that love is stronger than death and that, in the end, the forces of good will always triumph over the forces of evil.

So what does it mean to be disciples of the empty tomb? What do we mean when we proclaim “Alleluia, Christ is risen” and “the Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia”? How shall we act – in the words of our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry – as followers of the Episcopal branch of the Jesus movement? How are we to be transformed, like the two Marys in tonight’s gospel reading, by the great shaking – that is, the earthquake or *seismos* – that is the resurrection, the fulcrum upon which all of salvation history rests?

The answer lies in tonight’s gospel reading. When Mary Magdalene and the other Mary come face to face with the risen Christ, he tells them to do four things. Rejoice. Fear not. Tell. Go. Repeat after me. Rejoice. Fear not. Tell. Go. One more time! Rejoice. Fear not. Tell. Go. This is what it means to live in light of the empty tomb. This is the entire catechism and teaching of the church universal distilled into four commands. In fact, each command corresponds to one of the four parts of tonight’s Easter Vigil liturgy.

First, rejoice. When Jesus meets the two Marys, he says to them *chairete*, which is a typical Hellenistic greeting. Our gospel reading from the New Revised Standard Version translates this word as “Greetings!” “Greetings,” however, does not do justice to the meaning of *chairete*. The literal translation of this word is “rejoice.” Rejoice. It makes sense, of course, that the first instruction of the resurrected Jesus to the two Marys – and to all of us – is to rejoice. We rejoice because the tomb is empty.

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This corresponds to the first part of tonight's Vigil – the liturgy of the light – that culminated in the beautifully-sung Exsultet by Jesse. The first word of the Exsultet, and the title itself, means to rejoice. “Rejoice now, heav'nly hosts and choirs of angels. Rejoice and sing now, all the round earth. Rejoice and be glad now, Mother Church.”

We especially rejoice tonight as a parish on this Easter Vigil with the election and arrival of our eighth rector, Fr. John David van Dooren, and his husband Gary Norcross – and their dog Robert. It has been barely a week since their arrival, and Fr. John David has already modeled for us what it means to exercise servant leadership in his preaching, liturgical oversight, and pastoral care. Rejoice!

Second, fear not. Did you notice how often “fear” is referenced in tonight's reading? It appears four times in just ten verses. When the guards at the tomb see the angel rolling back the stone, they become like dead men out of fear. The angel tells the two Marys not to be afraid. But the two Marys still run with fear (and joy) to the disciples. When they suddenly meet the resurrected Christ, however, he tells them to fear not, or *mē phobeisthe*. Fear not. There is no longer a need to fear because death itself has been destroyed.

During the second part of tonight's Vigil – the liturgy of the word – we heard the powerful stories of salvation history such as Israel's deliverance at the Red Sea and Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones. In those stories, we are reminded not to be afraid. God is always with us, even in the midst of political, economic, and social turmoil. Now that death has lost its sting, we having nothing to fear. Fear not!

Third, tell. The two Marys are instructed by both the angel and Jesus to tell the disciples about the Good News of the resurrection. This is no time for mysterious messianic secrets. Go quickly and tell them, says the angel. Tell, or *apangeilate*, Jesus says to them. The two Marys are the very first evangelists. They are directed to proclaim the risen Christ to his brothers and sisters and to the ends of the earth.

This corresponds to the third part of the Vigil – the renewal of our baptismal vows. In just a few moments, Fr. John David will inaugurate his liturgical presence here at Transfiguration by asking us to tell each other what it means to live out the baptismal covenant. We will tell of our commitment to seek and serve Christ in all persons, to strive for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being. As Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans, if we have died with Christ in baptism, we will also live with him. Now that is good news that is worthy of telling the world. Tell!

Fourth, and finally, go. Jesus is not interested in chit-chat when he meets the two Marys. Coffee hour can wait. He instructs them to go – that is, *hypagate* – and to find the disciples, who are still hiding out of their fear of the political and religious authorities. The Greek word that Jesus uses literally means “go away,” “leave,” or “move along.”

In the fourth and final part of tonight's Easter Vigil mass, we will participate in the liturgy of the Eucharist. And at the end of mass, after we have been nourished by the body and blood of Christ – the bread of heaven and the cup of salvation – Deacon Ian will instruct us to “go.” Church is ultimately *not* about staying in church. Rather, church is about being fed and then going out into the world and living as disciples of the empty tomb. Go!

Rejoice. Fear not. Tell. Go. These are the four commands that the risen Jesus gives to the two Marys in tonight's gospel passage. And, by extension, these are the four commands that the risen Christ gives to all of us. This is what it means to be a disciple of the empty tomb. This is what it means to be transformed by the resurrection. And this is what it means to be a follower of the Jesus movement, tonight and always. The rest is just commentary.

Rejoice. Fear not. Tell. Go. May you and your loved ones have a blessed and happy Easter. Alleluia, Christ is risen!