

JESUS'S EMPTY TOMB

Genesis 1. 1 – 2. 4a

Exodus 14. 10-31, 15. 20-21

Isaiah 55. 1-11

Zephaniah 3. 14-20

Romans 6. 3-11

Matthew 28. 1-10

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

This Great Vigil of Easter is a liturgy stemming from the earliest centuries of the Church. This service itself was designed by those early Christians to do what has been done for us this evening. We are on the edge of amazement and discovery with the first witnesses of our Lord's resurrection. The light of the New Fire struck in the darkness a moment ago conveys the initiative of the sheer act of our God, who sent Jesus to live on earth and raised him from the dead very early in the morning on the first day of the week, Sunday. Christ will grant his first appearance after his resurrection to Mary Magdalene, and the news will spread like wildfire. Our Lord is alive!

In their own way, the four Old Testament prophecies we have just heard contain the promise of what we celebrate tonight. The resurrection of Christ is the act of the God who created the heavens and the earth, and behold they were very good. Delivering Israel from bondage in Egypt by the Exodus at the Red Sea, God prepared the way for an even greater Exodus from the bondage of sin and death. The prophet Isaiah was given a vision of God's plan to establish an eternal covenant with his people, whom he would pardon and then nourish with abundant life. And Zephaniah proclaimed that God's people would one day sing and shout, because their shame would be changed into praise as they realised that God no longer holds them in judgement, but rather rejoices over them.

When we will renew our own baptismal promises in a few moments, we will see that what we celebrate tonight is an on-going mystery. It reaches back to the Creation and the Flood, to Abraham and to the Exodus and Moses and the prophets, and culminates in the life, death and resurrection of our Lord. But it also reaches forward to every generation of the Church since the first witnesses of Jesus's resurrection, including this current generation - we who are here tonight. When we were baptised, we were not only baptised into Christ's death; we were also incorporated into his crucified and now resurrected living body.

All of this began with a group of our Lord's friends and disciples who were terrified, grieved and demoralised by the events of the previous week. It had begun with Jesus's triumphal entry into the Holy City. This was followed by betrayal, confusion and cowardice among the disciples, and by Christ's own disquieting insistence that what was happening was the will of his Father, a will which he embraced as the very purpose of his life as God's Son. And then it did happen, beginning on Thursday: his arrest, trial, condemnation, crucifixion and death on Friday. Even the proper preparation of his body for burial had to wait a full day because it was Saturday, the Sabbath. So when, as early as possible on the next day (that is, Sunday), Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salomé went back to his tomb to complete their final works of love towards our Lord, they found his tomb empty. There was, however, an angel messenger who told them what had happened and what to do: Jesus of Nazareth is risen, as he said; see the place where he lay; now, go, and tell the disciples.

I once had a professor who had a bad hip, and bad eyesight. His hip caused him to waddle a bit like a penguin, and his eyeglasses provided a great prop for something he did more often than he probably realised. This made him lovable, but also easily mimicked. 'How you view the world', he would say, 'rather depends on what set of lenses you are looking through'.

Tonight, you and I are provided with the lens through which we might look at all things; and this lens has the power to change all things. That lens is the empty tomb of Christ.

Now the empty tomb was only partial proof of what the young man dressed in a white robe claimed; but that wasn't all that he said. He told them, 'go, find his disciples, you know the ones who are hiding in fear; and tell them that you will all see Jesus when he appears to you.'

And don't you know that all those cowards, all those doubters, the discouraged, the faithless and the frightened must have seen just what that angel said they would. On Thursday night they ran away as fast as they could. On Friday and Saturday, they cowered behind locked doors. But on Sunday, they saw something that changed how they saw every single thing in the whole wide world.

It's as if they were finally given the right set of lenses through which to see their life, past, present, and future. And once they could see clearly, it was no time at all before these men and women were pushing off for the four corners of the earth, taking a story with them that they staked their lives on. Indeed, they very often paid with their lives, holding fast to the truth of what they saw on that Sunday. Not one of them wavered, and not one of them shrank back, even unto death.

I have been a Christian for more than five decades. As I look back over those years, I have never stopped believing that the good news of Christ is so good that it simply must be shared. On the basis of my encounter with our Lord, that is what I've been trying to do ever since: share the good news of the risen Jesus, who suffered for our sins and died for our salvation. And now we can share in his risen life.

St Stephen's Church (like the other parishes in Guernsey who are represented this evening) is a place where the mystery of Christ in his death and resurrection is brilliantly set forth in liturgy, music, teaching and (I trust) a community of faith immersed in these means of grace. May those of us who are here continue this heritage of witness, so that more and more people may come to know the joy of knowing our Lord. If you who are present have felt this joy for yourself, then please don't be shy or tongue-tied. Share the good news in every way you can. You can make all the difference in the world.

Alleluia. Christ is risen!

Amen.