

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

This is the night. This is the night of the central and most important event in the Christian story. This is the night when Jesus passes from death to life. And that's not even the most astonishing part of this event. There's more. You and I and all those who have been baptized have also passed with Christ from death to life.

To reveal God's unity with us, lying dormant in the hearts of every new baby, God manifested uniquely in the human body of Jesus of Nazareth. In that way, God could experience death as a human and we could awaken to the eternal life we soak in.

In one of our Elder Testament readings from the Book of Exodus, God hears the Israelites crying for deliverance in the reading. Just as God hears you and me crying out for deliverance. This year, perhaps more than in years past, the celebration of this Pascha is all the more poignant in light of the suffering, the crying out and the sense of being bound by that which keeps us from worshipping together physically.

We cannot baptize new Christians this year at St. Elizabeth. We cannot renew our baptismal promises in person as a physical collective. Even so, we are members of the Body of Christ. Someday, we will have opportunities to baptize and to renew.

In the meantime, we have something to offer the world. A life-and-death jolt can stimulate all kinds of interest in what it means to become resurrected manifestations of God. And we have ways to awaken people to the notion that God lives in each of us.

Through our baptisms, we have been raised and anointed with the Holy Spirit. The Divine glory that illuminates our lives and the world around us does not come from outside us like a spotlight from space. The Divine glory is not a foreign substance imposed from some other world.

We are illuminated from the inside by the presence of the Holy Spirit that shines in full unity with our created nature and our true character. Like the angel sitting on the stone rolled away from the empty tomb, we are filled with the same light that radiated from the face and the clothes of Christ transfigured, now resurrected.

This truth is stunning enough intellectually. Coming face to face with it emotionally is literally awesome. Being directly exposed to this illumination tends to inspire some combination of great reverence and joy, with little apprehension and, in some cases, more than a touch of fear like the two women who have come to the tomb in Matthew's Gospel.

People who talk about faith with no personal experience of a direct encounter often characterize faith as unshakeable belief; a personal, solid, undoubting and immovable attitude.

Matthew's Gospel portrays something else. Something real. A vision of the resurrection introduced by an earthquake and an angel so overwhelmingly radiant that armed guards faint dead away.

The guards, of course, are not the only people in a state of heightened alertness. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary do not faint, in part because the first words out of the angel's mouth are: "Do not be afraid; for I know you seek Jesus who has been crucified." Only then does the angel show them the empty tomb and send them back to Galilee.

"Do not be afraid."

As a stand-alone, that's a pretty tall order, especially in the context of earthquakes and messengers of God. "Don't be afraid." Maybe better to hear it as "Don't *give in* to your fear" so that we can listen to the angel's reasoning: "...for I know you seek Jesus who has been crucified."

And yet, that's really the key, isn't it? By remembering Jesus who has been crucified, we can truly encounter the Risen Christ. By recalling

the whole Paschal story from the challenge of Maundy Thursday to the grief of Good Friday, we go deeper into the mystery; deeper than simply noticing that Christ is no longer dead.

By seeking “Jesus who has been crucified,” we open ourselves to an encounter like Mary Magdalene and the other Mary had. They expected to find a corpse and instead found an angel radiant with light who told them, “He is not here.” And as the two women ran from the empty tomb with fear and great joy, suddenly Jesus met them. And the first words from the mouth of the Risen Christ? “Do not be afraid.”

Do not be afraid or, again, don’t let your fear *overwhelm* you. Because the Christ you seek is alive. Christ is alive *now* and still pouring out life and love for us. We encounter the Risen Christ in every Mass, in nature’s extravagant beauty and in the people around us as we wake up to the energy released by the death and rising of Christ.

We seek Christ Jesus who has been crucified not as some abstraction, but as the Divine light made human in the material life, the work and the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth, crucified and risen as the Anointed. We seek that resurrection light now, in the midst of our own tangible lives even as we wait for the resurrection yet to come.

Once awakened to the presence of the Risen Christ, we leave the empty tomb to offer that light to each other, to friends and strangers. We have not been magically changed into something that we were not. What has been illuminated in us by the light of God is what has always been and will remain forever true.

Archbishop William Temple’s biography tells about an incident that happened at a service of dedication for 2,000 young men and women at the University Church of St Mary the Virgin in 1931. At the close of the service, Dr. Temple asked the congregation to sing the beloved Isaac Watts hymn, “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.”

Now, bear with me: I know this is not an Easter hymn. In fact, some of you may remember that, for few years, we sang some of the verses as part of the Stations of the Cross during Lent.

I only mention it because what Archbishop Temple did seems a perfect fit for where we are at this moment. As the congregation took a breath to begin singing the last stanza, he stopped them and asked them to read the words of the last stanza to themselves.

"Now," he said, "if you mean them with all your heart, sing them as loud as you can. If you don't mean them at all, keep silent. If you mean them even a little and want to mean them more, sing them very softly."

And as the organ started playing again, two thousand voices whispered:

"Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an offering far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all."

This is the night. When all who trust in Christ are delivered from the gloom of sin and are restored to grace and holiness of life. That truth may fill you with great reverence and joy. Or it may inspire a little apprehension or more fear than you would like. Or it may stir up some combination like the two women saw the empty tomb and encountered the Risen Christ on the way home.

Faith is not an unchanging, undoubting, immovable belief. Faith is the trusting and honest, even if tentative, whispering of the heart in the aftermath of earth-shaking experiences; a trusting whisper of hope that we, too, have been blessed and given to share love so amazing that it we cannot contain it.

Faith is walking with our brother to the cross and then from the empty tomb trusting that even in our genuine concerns and real-life setbacks, we carry enough of the light of Christ with us to cherish each person we meet with love so divine that like a candle-flame, it only grows as we give it away.

This is the night. How wonderful and beyond our knowing. Christ is risen. Alleluia.

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