

The Great Vigil of Easter Matthew 28: 1-10

Our Bible gives us four different Gospels, with four slightly different accounts of the resurrection of Jesus. And there are many different ways to interpret what is written in scripture. This bothers some people, because they believe that if what occurred was real, there should be just one, consistent report of that glorious day so long ago.

But the differences make sense to me, because in my experience all people see and hear any event in slightly different ways. I also think that the resurrection is such an amazing thing that all we mere mortals can do is walk around its multiple sides and dimensions, and give glory to God for this foundation of our faith.

It makes me think back to the tiny Methodist church I served for two years in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. I quickly learned that the congregation didn't care at all what I did with the worship service, as long as I didn't touch the Adult Bible classes that met in the sanctuary for the hour before church – the Women's Class in the front, and the Men in the back. My job was to sit in a pew in the middle of the church and keep my mouth shut.

Which was how we arrived at to that wonderful Easter Sunday morning when I could hear, behind me, one of the men putting a question to the acknowledged leader of the group, "So Sam, When Mary Magdalene meets Jesus there in the garden and starts to grab his feet, why does he say, 'Don't hold on to me.'?" And Sam's reply was, "Well, see, Jesus had just come out of the tomb, and He wasn't set yet." At that point, my challenge was to not fall off my pew in hysterical laughter. They hadn't taught me this at Yale. But you see what I mean about all the different ways to hear this story of our faith!

This year at the Vigil the resurrection account from Matthew was read, which isn't just like the other three Gospels, because there are things he wants us to understand. In the first place, the two Mary's who came to the tomb were not carrying spices and oils to anoint a

body. It's as though they had actually listened to at least some of what Jesus had taught, even if they didn't know exactly what it meant. Matthew says they came "to see" which means not just to use their eyes, but to try to understand.

What they experienced was an earthquake caused by the lightening descent of a wonderfully psychedelic angel who effortlessly threw aside the tombstone and sat on it as though with arms crossed saying, "There! That takes care of that!"

This amazing rock-star of a messenger told them, "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.'"

Unlike the account in Mark, where the women "fled from the tomb in terror", here the women took off running, in fear but also in overwhelming joy, to do as they were told. So they were already carrying out their mission when they met Jesus who greeted them.

When they took hold of his feet to worship, unlike John's account, he did not forbid them to do this. Matthew wants us to see clearly that Jesus is not a ghost or spirit, but has been raised fully alive in the tangible body.

The risen Christ then repeated the message they are to give the disciples. These women, who have been following and supporting Jesus throughout his ministry, became the first evangelists. Why was it the women who had this experience? One might have thought it would be one of the eleven remaining disciples who had been "officially" called. It's as though that first Easter message is not given to a 'pro' but to a couple of amateurs.

That's an important distinction, because the word 'amateur' comes from the root word referring to those who do something, not as a job, but out of love. Surely it was love that got these women out of bed and out of hiding at the crack of dawn. It was love fulfilled in the

resurrection that sent them running full tilt to bring the joyous word to the disciples.

That word to the first followers, is also given to us this night: God's love cannot be defeated by death and despair; God shatters the boundaries of what we think is possible.

There are times in most of our lives when we feel as though our cherished hopes and dreams are as crushed and dead as those of the disciples after the crucifixion. But the message brought from the empty tomb by the breathless amateurs, is that new things can arise from all our deaths, large and small. We are no longer captive to the rules and roles that have seemed to define our lives.

But how we are to live into our own resurrection, this new life which has already begun? If you have ever gone cross-country skiing across an expanse of deep, new snow, you probably learned how much it helps if there is someone skiing in front of you, breaking trail. In the same way, the promise from that brilliant angel at the tomb and from Jesus himself, is that Jesus is going ahead of us, and will meet us in Galilee, whichever Galilee opens before us, into the larger world. When we trust this promise, we can move forward, like those first witnesses – in awe and joy.

That is what resurrection means for us.

In the words of poet Lillian Clifton:

the green of jesus
is breaking the ground
and the sweet smell of delicious jesus
is opening the house and
the dance of jesus music
has hold of the air and
the world is turning
in the body of jesus and
the future is possible

Or as we say here:

Christ is Risen! The Lord is Risen Indeed.! Alleluia. Amen.