

Great Vigil of Easter – Year C – April 3, 2010
Genesis 1:1-2:2; Exodus 14:10-15:1; Isaiah 55:1-11; Ezekiel 37:1-14;
Romans 6:3-11; Psalm 114; Luke 24:1-12
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Alleluia! Christ is Risen. The Lord is Risen indeed. Alleluia!

As a radio broadcaster, Paul Harvey's delightful way of telling stories was perhaps most famously captured in his regular feature *The Rest of the Story*. One of those stories is about a young boy named Walter. As a boy, Walter moved to the country with his parents. One day he was out wandering in the apple orchard, and was amazed to see an owl sleeping on one of the branches. He thought that the owl would be a great pet, and so he quietly approached the tree, reaching up and grabbing the little owl by the legs. As you can imagine, the creature was instantly awake and desperate to escape. In the chaos of beating wings, a sharp flashing beak, loud screeching, and talons ready to strike, instead of letting go, Walter grasped tighter. Finally, in sheer panic, he dropped the bird to the ground and stomped on it, killing the owl. Gazing at the mess of blood and broken wings, and realizing what he had done he burst into tears. After a while, he went back home, found a shovel, returned, and buried the owl in the orchard.

We too have witnessed great violence, an innocent one murdered, and buried. Tonight we return to the tomb. In the story of the Jesus' resurrection according to Luke's Gospel, we have to wait until the end to find out the names of the women who have come to anoint Jesus' body. It is neat little twist to help us realize that they are the women who have been with Jesus throughout His ministry, providing for Him from their own resources. They are also the same women who witnessed His crucifixion, death, and burial. In other words, they fulfill all the requirements for apostleship, and their credibility as witnesses is assured. As they come early in the morning after the Sabbath has ended, what they find is truly shocking. The huge stone that seals the tomb's entrance has been rolled away, and Jesus' body is missing. Luke tells us that the women "were perplexed" by this turn of events. They have just experienced the loss of Jesus to death on a cross, and now, in the puzzling absence of His physical remains, they are even more at a loss. The women are as lost as any who do not yet know Christ, or anyone who has chosen to turn away from Him to pursue their own interests. The empty tomb does not immediately help the women figure out what on earth is going on. Clearly, there is more to understanding the significance of the empty tomb than just experiencing the moment.

Right on cue, two men in dazzling clothes appear. We assume them to be angels. They are at least as otherworldly in appearance that the women drop to their knees and bow their heads. As always, Luke is precise in his choice of words, and it may well be that this is our first prompt. It may be that we, and the women at the tomb, are meant to recall Jesus' conversation on the Mountain with two men clothed in glory – Moses and Elijah – talking with Jesus about his immanent departure, or exodus, to be completed in Jerusalem. Whoever the two beings are, after their initial question, they say this to the women, "Remember, how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Then they remember, and the light of faith grows brighter as the memories come flooding back, and they think about those days in Galilee. What we learn is that both then and now the empty tomb makes no sense outside of Christ's life and ministry. Only when we recall the events of His life, and His own prophetic words concerning His death and resurrection, do we even begin to understand what God has done for us in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Remembering grounds the mystery of the resurrection in everyday life. Jesus' resurrection only makes sense as an extension of His ministry amongst His people. What He taught, what He did, the incredible deeds of power, the way in which He built community, restoring life to those without hope. Only now can the women – only now can you and I – consider the question that our two messengers ask: "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" At our last vestry meeting earlier this week,

we reflected on some of the Scriptures for Holy Week. There were several great insights, two of which are particularly relevant this glorious Easter evening. The first is that we often get stuck doing the same old stuff, without challenging ourselves to discern what new things God may be calling us to do and be. The second is that we really need to get out of the box – tomb? – and stop thinking that if we did something this way or that way two years ago, five years ago, ten years ago that it is somehow set in stone. In effect, the Scriptures helped us to see that it is good to push the stone out of the way, open the tomb, reflect on Jesus' life and ministry, and discern just how God is calling us to live our resurrection life in community today.

That same question of looking for the living among the dead also challenges us to consider what is truly dead in our own lives. And to ask ourselves why we might be holding on to dead ideas or ideologies, or even old visions of being the Body of Christ with no room for change or growth. Do we choose to stay with what we know – or at least what we think we know – because it feels safe? Because it is familiar, comfortable and reassuring, making us feel like we have a semblance of control? Did the women stay at the tomb, or did they embrace the message and go forward? Did they suddenly have a vision of all that their future held for them? Not at all. They moved forward on trust, and in faith, first to share the Good News of Christ's resurrection, and then as followers in the Way.

As the years passed Walter reflected deeply on what had happened that sad day he found the owl. Deep down it affected him for the rest of his life. As an older man, he said he had never killed anything ever again. His story didn't end in the bloody memories of that day. He found redemption, and lived a resurrection life. In fact, his life's work brought thousands of animals to life on the big screen, bringing great joy to millions of children and adults alike. The boy, Walter, grew up to be known all around the world as Walt Disney. That is the rest of that story. But what about Jesus' resurrection? What does it mean for you and for me? We might think we know the rest of our resurrection story. Think again! We cannot know it because it is not yet written in stone in your life and mine, in the lives of this whole community, and those of the Body of Christ throughout the world. Jesus' resurrection is the gift of renewed hope, the gift of salvation filled with the promise of eternal life for all who believe in Him. Our creator God gives new life wherever there is death. In fact, resurrection happens every day. It happens every time we make a decision to set aside self. It happens every time we offer ourselves to God in Christ Jesus, and every time we experience a loss in our lives. However, great or small that loss is. This night of all nights, let us open our hearts to the incalculable possibilities of God's life-giving grace. This night of all nights, let us rejoice in the gift of our salvation. Alleluia! Christ is Risen! The Lord is Risen indeed. Alleluia!

Amen.