

**Great Vigil of Easter – Year A – April 23, 2011**

**Psalm 114; Romans 6:3-11; Matthew 28:1-10**

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Movie giant Samuel Goldwyn, of Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer fame once said, “We want a story that starts out with an earthquake and works its way up to a climax.” Well, Mr. Goldwyn, tonight’s Gospel reading is everything you could ever want in a story. While movies are mostly filled with fantasy and fiction, Matthew presents us with eyewitness accounts of the events surrounding Jesus’ glorious resurrection. The story is bursting with God’s in-breaking messengers, fear and faith, great urgency, and the tremendous climax in the realization that God in Christ Jesus has broken the bonds of death and sin, once for all. As Mr. Goldwyn would no doubt approve, the earthquake is just the start of what unfolds into the greatest story ever told.

In the darkness of this late hour, we too are on a profound journey of discovery as our Lenten observances come to an end, and we celebrate Jesus’ resurrection, our redemption and healing, with great joy in our hearts. We want that joyous destination so bad that we’re tempted to rush here, and in so doing we miss the point of the journey itself – God’s gift of time for our own transformation into Christ-likeness. And so, we also give thanks that God has blessed us with this night to move a little more slowly through the last part of our journey to Easter, to walk a little longer in darkness, so that we can appreciate more fully the Light of Christ healing us and guiding us. We are also blessed to be able to savor the revelation of God, after the earthquakes of our own lives, knowing that God does not desire for us to live in fear. And to share the Good News with others through our own stories that touch, weave in and out of that whole and majestic history of salvation, most fully revealed in God’s Word, and especially through the life, death and resurrection of the Word made flesh, our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Gospel reading begins as light starts to dawn on the first day of the week. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary are still walking in darkness themselves to the tomb of Jesus, when a great earthquake hits. Terrifying enough in the light of day, it’s no wonder that they’re filled with fear. We too have all experienced earthquakes in our own lives that are equally shocking, leaving us feeling disoriented, unstable, and shaken to the core of our being. Just like the two Mary’s we experience the earthquake of grief and loss in the death of our loved ones. There are plenty of experiences that can literally rock our world. Sudden or serious illness, accidents, or the loss of a job. Transitions into new periods in our lives, like marriage or parenthood. The trauma of divorce, or dealing with addictions. Learning to be good stewards of God’s gifts. Perhaps even struggling with debts as we send our kids to college, adjust to an empty nest, or retire. No one is insulated from the simple and complex realities of life – it’s part and parcel of the human condition. However, learning to live into hope and healing, God’s peace and power available to us now in our resurrection lives is one of the great gifts of God’s grace in and through the Easter message. This is one reason why the journey is so important, because time is a great teacher. As a slow learner, I can personally attest to God’s grace in all the do-overs I’ve been given, as I’m sure others here tonight can also testify. As we grow closer to God, depending more and more on Him and less and less on our own, horribly limited strength and abilities, we walk from darkness through the grainy dawn, giving thanks to God for the glorious sunrise, until we can feel the Light of Christ flowing in us, igniting within us a passionate flame of love.

Is it a fearful thing to let go of control, even if it is more perception than reality, to open ourselves to God, to experience self as small and sinful as compared to God’s greatness, goodness, and infinite love? You bet it is! Yet in each divine revelation, be it angelic messenger or the risen Christ Himself, there is God’s word: “Do not be afraid.” Our growing relationship with God in Christ Jesus, with others, and especially our brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ, broadens and strengthens our trust and our faith in Him. Each fiber of our being that pushes its roots into God’s light and love enhances our capacity to draw

on the source of all life, the unquenchable well of living water that cleanses and heals, that baptizes us into Christ's death and launches us into new life in Him. Many things can be loosed in the earthquakes of life. The stone that seems to separate and hold Jesus apart from life is rolled away in the mystery of the divine in-breaking to provide the evidence of the empty tomb to the first witnesses of His resurrection. Perhaps it will or has taken a spiritual, emotional or even physical earthquake to reveal the presence of a tombstone that is blocking our own way forward, or the possibility that we can step from darkness to light. Ernest Hemingway once wrote, "Life breaks everyone." In the world of literature and movies, characters are like puppets of their authors, manipulated and moved around at will, not so under God's gracious providence. God's divine act in the resurrection of Jesus proves that God redeems all things, heals all things, and that life eternal is available to all through Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. In faith, we are welcomed to new life and freedom in Christ. This is one of the most profound revelations of our continuing journey, after the earthquake.

The risen Lord first appears to the two Mary's, who are His apostles of the Good News, saying, "Greetings!" As we should expect, this is no casual "Hi there, how's it going?" The Greek word has multiple meanings that add to our own experience of Jesus' love for each of us. Not only is this a salutation, a hearty greeting, but it also means to rejoice exceedingly and be glad; and to be well or to thrive. This is yet another example through the risen Christ, of God's salvific grace and healing. Would we expect anything less in God's goodness and grace towards us? Of course not! Everything in Jesus' life, death and resurrection that leads to this moment, this meeting on the road, speaks boldly of God's incredible and steadfast love towards you and me, towards all His creation. Wherever we are, Jesus meets us, as we are, to share His love and the hope of the resurrection with us.

As the Body of Christ in the world, it's now our turn to share the story that begins with an earthquake and works its way to a great climax revealing God's love, peace, and joy through all the trials and the delights of life. It's nothing more than our own stories of faith. It is certainly nothing less than the hope that we have in our hearts, because we have rolled away all obstacles to God's grace. In word and deed we are invited to participate more fully in the revelation of God at this time, as we share how we have stepped into the light, accepted the gifts of faith and healing, and have responded to Jesus' greeting.

In tonight's Gospel story, we come full circle. Jesus' public ministry begins in Galilee, and He tells us that we will see Him there. In T.S. Eliot's poem, *East Coker* from the *Four Quartets* written in 1940, he writes, "In my beginning is my end....It was not ... what one had expected. What was to be the value of the long looked forward to, long hoped for calm... and the wisdom of age?... Do not let me hear of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly, their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession, of belonging to one another, or to others, or to God. The only wisdom we can hope to acquire is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless... But the faith and love and the hope are all in the waiting.... In my end is my beginning." Our wisdom is as humble servants. Our wait has been purposeful. God's perfect love has driven away all fear. Our joy is immeasurable.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! The Lord is Risen indeed. Alleluia!