

## Homily for the Easter Vigil – April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2022



The four versions of the resurrection story—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John’s version—all have these three things in common: the tomb is empty, the resurrection took place in the early hours of Sunday morning, and Mary Magdalene was the one who made the greatest discovery of all time!

We could add a fourth thing that all four gospel writers report on—angels. Some versions have one angel, others—like Luke’s version which we just heard—have two. One way or another, the role of the angels seems to be the same. They are always telling Mary Magdalene, and any other women who may be present, that if they are looking for Jesus they are looking in the wrong place. Graveyards are not the places to look for someone who said, **“I am the resurrection and the life.”** The role of the angels, it seems to me, is to remind the first witnesses, as well as you and me, of all that Jesus told us while he was still in Galilee. If we remember what Jesus *told* us and, more importantly, what he *showed* us, then we’ll come to the same conclusion of the angels—that Jesus is not in the tomb, so we can eliminate that place off our list. The reason the tomb is empty is that Jesus, in his resurrected state, is out and about doing what he always did in his pre-resurrected state. He is bearing witness to God’s eternal life and love, especially to those who are living in darkness and without hope. He is instilling faith in God’s goodness, but coming to faith is not easy. Faith almost always unfolds in stages, stages that are so slow you wonder if you are progressing at all. Case in point: Luke’s version of the resurrection, the version we just heard.

The first stage in faith is: I can’t believe it. When the women report back to the Apostles about the empty tomb and the encounter with the two angels, they were, initially, not believed. The men dismissed it as ***an idle tale***. They couldn’t believe it. Maybe we are more like them than we want to admit. The Good News Jesus wants to give us is so good, we can’t believe we are deserving of it. We are so used to earning our own keep—being our own man, our own woman—that we find it hard just to receive. If we were honest with ourselves, we would have to admit, receive is actually harder than giving.

The second stage of faith is curiosity. I can't believe it, but curiosity is still pushing me forward. I have to check it out myself just like Peter did. It says, ***"Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves."*** Resurrection faith isn't just affirming that the resurrection happened. Resurrection faith is a summons, a call you might say, to remember what Jesus told us while he was still in Galilee walking this earth with us. Peter simply analyzes the empty tomb; he's not yet a believer in the resurrection. It seems that even the words of angels are not enough to bring people to faith; they must have an experience of Christ's presence. Isn't that what we are all seeking, an experience of the Risen Lord in our own lives? Isn't that what we are called to give to those who wander into this church building driven by nothing more than their curiosity?

So first you are dismissive, you can't believe it. Then, behind everyone else's back, you secretly run to the tomb out of curiosity. The third stage of faith is amazement. Peter went home, amazed at what happened. A little story of amazement and wonder.

***Several years before his death, a remarkable rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel, suffered a near-fatal heart attack. His closest male friend was at his bedside. Heschel was so weak he was only able to whisper. "Sam," he said, "I feel only gratitude for my life, for every moment that I have lived. I am ready to go. I have seen so many miracles during my lifetime." The old rabbi was exhausted by his effort to speak. After a long pause, he said, "Never, once in my life, did I ask God for success or wisdom or power or fame. I asked for wonder, and He gave it to me."***

First you dismiss the idle tale, then you're curious, then you're filled with amazement and wonder. Unfortunately, the last line of today's gospel ends with, "Peter went home, amazed at what had happened." While amazement is the third step in faith, it's not the last. All the gospel accounts of the resurrection have abrupt endings. I think it's done deliberately. Our lives are meant to complete the story. We are supposed to move to the fourth stage, the stage of boldness.

Amazement leads you to bold *thinking* and even bolder *action*. Usually, being amazed at someone else's life, you secretly and boldly ask yourself: "I wonder if I could live like that?" In the Acts of the Apostles, which we will hear a lot from during the Easter season, Peter, the one-time-coward learns to speak boldly. ***"People of***

***Jerusalem, you handed Jesus over, you crucified him, and you murdered the Author of Life, but God raised him to newness of life.*** Where you and I screwed up, God succeeded.”

First you dismiss the idle talk of others, then you're curious, then you're amazed and, finally, you boldly proclaim your faith. Once we are at that stage, we no longer need the angels to point us in the right direction. Like Jesus, we set our face like flint upon Jerusalem and accept everything that life throws at us. The crosses of life no longer frighten us, for we stand with the Risen One, the One who, this night, overcame every form of death imaginable.

The tomb is empty, Joseph. Jesus is about in the land. May you keep discovering him in this faith community and in the world beyond these four walls.

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