Homily for Easter Vigil

The last part of the first line of today's gospel says, ***"Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb."*** That's what they went to see, a tomb. We know the rest of the story in ways these two could not possibly have known. If we were in their shoes, we probably would have gone to see a tomb as well. Yet, something shakes them. Something wakes them up.

Because we are humans, we can only describe and give names to earthly experiences. We can't fully describe heavenly things except to use earthly metaphors. The heavens opened up, and the women were visited by an Angel of the Lord who rolled back the stone and sat upon it. The best gospel writer Matthew could do, to describe this inbreaking of heaven into our earthly realm, was to say an earthquake happened. It was that powerful.

The angel then says something interesting to the women. ***"I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified."*** We were initially told that the women went to see the tomb. The angel has told them that they are there for a deeper reason, a deeper yearning, a more hope-filled search than even they realized. "I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified."

I think the experience of these women represents what's going on in all of us all the time. Without knowing it, because they also didn't know it, there is a deeper longing going on in each of us. If it is not an explicit searching for God, because—let's face it--some people don't believe in God, it is a search, nonetheless, for meaning, for purpose, for love, for forgiveness, for beauty, for justice, for inclusion. This searching is in every human heart. St. Augustine probably said it best when he wrote, "Our hearts are restless, Lord, until they rest in you."

In the opening chapter of the Gospel of John, Andrew and another disciple of John the Baptist have Jesus walk past them. For reasons we are not told, they follow him. Jesus senses that he is being followed. He turns to the two and says, ***"What are you looking for?"*** Before Andrew even knew Jesus, he was already looking for something. Perhaps the something he was looking for was meaning in his own life. He knew there was a purpose to life, and more importantly a purpose to his life, but he had not yet found it. He had not yet encountered, as the women at the tomb would later encounter, a voice that would say to him, "I know you are looking for Jesus. I am He. I know you're not looking for something but someone, an encounter with the living God. Come and follow me, Andrew." This happened on the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

On Good Friday we had that long passion reading from the Gospel of John. The opening scene takes place on the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus is about to be arrested. Twice Jesus asks the Roman soldiers, ***"Whom are you looking for?"*** He gives them, as he gives us, more than one chance to ponder the question. They cannot get to the heart of the question because they cannot listen to the longing of their own hearts. The great irony is that the soldiers showed up with lanterns and torches; I assume to see better in the dark. And here, standing in the midst of their darkness is Jesus, the Light of the World. If for one brief moment they would have heard Jesus' question "whom are you looking for?" they would have dropped the lanterns and torches and moved toward the real light, Jesus.

It's a mystery in my own life why I don't take more seriously the words of Jesus, "Whom are you looking for?" Maybe it's the busyness of life or some other excuse. Who knows? Sometimes in my life, like Andrew, I hear the question, and without giving it a second thought, follow Jesus right away without knowing exactly what I'm getting into. More often than not, though, I am like the women at the tomb. They think they are going to ***see the tomb***, yet they get surprised, and finally, with both fear and joy, are able to witness to their faith. There are also plenty of times in my life when I am like the soldiers in the Garden of Gethsemane. I can hear the question, "whom are you looking for?" more than once yet nothing registers. In those times I'm clearly being guided by my own lanterns and torches rather than the Light of the World.

I think the earthquake, at the resurrection scene, functions the same way as the crowing rooster functions just after Peter denied, for the third time, knowing Jesus. They both function as wakeup calls. People are not the same afterwards. When the cock crows, Peter wakes up to what he has done. It's an invitation to conversion, not a condemnation of some shameful act on Peter's part that Jesus predicted. The cock crows to tell us a new day is dawning. In the middle of his shame, a new forgiveness was already breaking through, like the dawn, into Peter's heart. Likewise, when the earthquake hit, it was an invitation to the women to ponder what really brought them to the garden, why they were really there. It wasn't to see a tomb, after all. It was to encounter someone who would tell them why they really came in the first place— "I know you are looking for Jesus...that's why you came." I know you people are looking for Jesus; that's why you came to church today.

Our lives are like onions. We live mostly on the outer layers with our torches and lanterns. If we allow him, Jesus will peel back the outer layers of our lives with the persistent question, "Whom are you looking for?"

The gospels started in Galilee with Andrew, the first Apostle to respond to Jesus' inquiry, "What are you looking for?" The gospels end with an angel saying to the women, "I know what you are looking for. ***You are looking for Jesus who was crucified.*** He's going ahead of you to Galilee where he called his first disciple. He is alive and doing what he has always delighted in doing---calling people to himself and giving them a share in his abundant life. This is my message for you."

Fr. Phil