

Homily – April 19th, 2025 – Holy Saturday (Easter Vigil)



That last line of the gospel, describing the central event in our faith—the resurrection--seems a little anticlimactic. It read: ***“Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths (burial shroud) by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.”*** He just went home. It sounds like Peter shrugged his shoulders, and said to himself, “I guess he’s not here. I might as well just go home, have a beer and watch the hockey game.”

Rather than being anticlimactic-- a story that fizzles and doesn’t live up to its hype--this ending is saying, “Stay tuned. The best is yet to come. The story is not finished.” Although no one actually saw the Risen Lord exiting the tomb, it is the women, in all four gospels, who are the first witnesses to the empty tomb and Mary Magdalene, herself, who first encounters the Risen Lord.

Somehow, that story got passed on to someone, who passed it on to someone else, who passed it on to us. Our job is to pass it on to our elect, who tonight will become the Church’s newest members. They, in turn, will pass it on to others and the 2000-year-old chain of unbroken witnessing will continue. By the end of the first century, starting with just a few women at an empty tomb, and 11 men half-frightened to leave the upper room, Christianity had

multiplied to one-half million Christians. How was it possible? They were compelled Christians. They didn't have many professional evangelists. They didn't need to, because they were all evangelists. They had few great preachers. They were all witnesses. They had few foreign missionaries. They were all missionaries.

This didn't come easily. Many of our greatest martyrs, people who laid down their lives for their faith, came from the first century at a time when it would have been so easy to crush the fledgling Church. Coming to faith isn't easy. It unfolds in stages much like it unfolded in tonight's gospel.

Stage one is: I can't believe it. When the women tell the Apostles that the tomb was empty--and that they had met angelic beings who said, ***“Why do you look for the living among the dead?”***—the men didn't believe it. They dismissed it as an idle tale. Are we not the same, in our cynical state? We tend to dismiss anything that appears too good. There is a drive in us, a desire to earn our own salvation. We are suspect of anything that is handed to us, even God's grace. But God has a way of humbling us, of reminding us that we're not in charge. As we get older “grace” and “surrender” take on more and more significance.

Stage two: curiosity. You who are being baptized tonight felt a tug within your heart. At first you wanted to dismiss it, and then, you became curious about it. You weren't sure about becoming a member of the Church, but you were curious. (You've all heard the expression, “curiosity killed the cat.” Well,

tonight curiosity is going to drown the cat). Kayden, Constance, Julie, Joyce, John, and Wyatt, you all display the curiosity of Peter in today's gospel reading. While he initially dismisses the women's story, there is something about it he just can't let go of. So behind the women's backs, he just has to check it out for himself. The angels' words to the women, for Peter, is not enough. The women's words, themselves, are not enough either for Peter. He has to go and find out himself. You, our elect, are here tonight, because you need to experience, for yourselves, the Risen Lord. The time for words is over. The R.C.I.A. team has yacked at you long enough. Our words, though well intentioned, were never going to be enough anyway. You, like Peter, need to go to the tomb yourself.

I can't believe it, but I'm curious. Here comes stage three in our faith journey. It's called "amazement." ***Peter went home, amazed at what happened.*** To you, our elect in Christ, I hope you live a long life full of amazement at what the Lord is doing in you and in the world. Despite all the violence, turmoil, dictators, and degradation of the planet, what God has created is still an amazing world. Another word for amazement is wonder. I offer this story. ***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.” Kayden, Constance, Laurie, John, Joyce, and Wyatt, I hope you will always walk through this life—even and especially on your worst days—with wonder and amazement in your eyes.

I can’t believe it. I’m curious. I’m amazed. Now comes the fourth stage of our spiritual development: I gotta tell someone. The angels told the women, the women told the men, and when the hockey game was finally over, the men got off the couch and told someone else. Those people told others, who told others, who told us, and now we are telling you. But here’s the thing about witnesses to our faith—rarely will it come through words. It will, almost always, come through action.

Although nobody will tell you outright, nevertheless, people are hungering to see the gospel in you. The Gospel according to Kayden just has to be written. We need witnesses even more than we need teachers. You can always teach and pass on someone else’s words, ideas, and even tell their story. But when you witness to the gospel with your own life, God is bypassing the middlemen, and saying, “You are my man. You are my women. You are my chosen one. Go and proclaim the resurrection with your life. Now that you are my disciples, go and make disciples of other who dismiss good news, who are just a little bit curious, and who hunger for wonder and amazement in a cynical world.

My elect, your witness to the resurrection of Christ, your witness to the goodness of God that has never left the world, will unlikely be accompanied by obvious signs from the heavens, or miracles, or crowds of people who hang

on your every word. With the help of the Holy Spirit, your witness will come in ordinary ways, through your good days and bad days, through your success and failures, through your proudest moments and your embarrassments, through the way you get through school, through the way you delight and struggle in your marriage, through the ways you tuck your little children into bed and through the ways you want to strangle them as teenagers. It's all ordinary stuff, yet it carries an authority. Authority without personal witness always seems to ring hollow. But authority backed by personal witness has power... lasting power.

From tonight onward, my elect, Jesus' authority is given to you. He holds nothing to himself but gives it all to you. Hear these 2000-year-old words of Jesus spoken anew to you, "Receive the power of the Holy Spirit which will come upon you, so that you can be my witnesses, not only here in Jerusalem—not only here in Riverview—but to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

~Fr. Phil