

The Great Vigil of Easter

April 24, 2011

Rev. Ken Wratten at St. Stephen's, San Jose

Exodus 14:10-15:1

Israel's deliverance at the Red Sea

Ezekiel 36:22-28

God plans to give us a new heart, to place a new spirit within us

Romans 6:3-11

Just as Christ was raised, we are raised to walk in newness of life.

Matthew 28:1-10

An angel at the tomb tells Mary Magdalene and Mary "I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised."

I have shared with some of you that this is my favorite worship service of the year. It completes the spiritual journey of the Triduum, the last three days of Jesus human life on earth; and having experienced it significantly intensifies the impact of Easter morning for me.

Consider this logic: There is a Resurrection; because there was a death. There is new life; because there was an old life. I propose to you tonight that we should take some time to consider what death, and whose old life has been changed. Let's look at the last few days (the Triduum), and the thread of teaching for which Easter morning provides the spectacular climax.

On Maundy Thursday Jesus sent Judas off to complete the final steps of his betrayal. He did not tie Judas up while he washed his feet, or threaten him. Jesus' actions modeled radical self-giving. Then Jesus instructed those who follow him that they too should model this radical self-giving. On Good Friday Jesus said from his cross, "Forgive them Father." He was now teaching radical forgiveness. And tonight we experience in a very palpable way the powerful transition from the darkness of death and a sealed tomb, to a spark – then a flicker – a single flame – and a fire with flames carried by all of us into this space – developing into candles, candle stands, flood lights, lilies, and white vestments – signifying the beginning of a brilliant new life. Through the Resurrection Event, we are confronted with evidence for radical believing.

Roman Catholic theologian Hans Kung asked, "How did such a new beginning come out of such a disastrous end? How did this Jesus movement come into existence after Jesus' death? How did a community emerge in the name of a crucified man, and take shape as a Christian "Church"? How did this condemned heretical teacher become Israel's Messiah, the Christ? How did the disowned prophet become "Lord" and "Savior"? How did the rejected blasphemer become "God's Son"? How did his followers come to proclaim not only the Gospel of Jesus, but Jesus himself as the Gospel, unintentionally turning the proclaimer of the message into the content of the proclamation? How did the message of the Kingdom of God emerge into the message of Jesus as the Christ of God?"

The answer is that these things all resulted from the radical belief that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Without that Event, these things would not have happened, and we would not be called Christians today. But there is even more to consider here... The Resurrection was not just the experience of Jesus, it was also an act of God. Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, "Just as Christ was raised, we are raised to walk in newness of life." This means that Christ's resurrection is something God has done to call you and me to our own new life. The Resurrection centers our life in the Risen Christ – it centers our life on a new set of values and actions, that in turn are centered on God, not centered on the physical world. The Resurrection Event pulls us up from the grey, anemic, monotonous existence of sleeping, eating, and working, to the dazzlingly brilliant life as children of a God who loves us so much that He allowed his only Son to die for us.

Paul told the Colossians that the Resurrection Event pulls at us to set our minds on spiritual matters rather than earthly things (3:2). Psalm 118:23 “This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.” The majesty of this night reflects the majesty of what God has done during this night; for Jesus and for YOU.

Our radical belief assures us that Jesus is present here and now;
Present through meditating on his written Word;
present through the sacraments we share;
present through our prayers;
present through the relationships of our faith family
and the good work we accomplish here;
and present through the Holy Spirit now flowing through every one of us here, planting God-sourced thoughts in us to guide us in a godly life.

We have been given the charge to practice radical self-giving.
We accept the call to give and to accept radical forgiveness.
We have the evidence, and commit ourselves to the radical belief that the Resurrection we celebrate proves that Jesus is exactly who he said he is.
And we take claim to this Resurrection as our own, too;
A Resurrection granted us by our God every day of our lives,
for us to live a new life centered on God, here and now.
This night and this service say it all...
Our Christ is certainly among us.

Alleluia, Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia! Amen.