

Sermon: Easter Vigil, 22 March 2008  
Christ Church Riverdale, Bronx, NY  
Robert C. Lamborn, Rector

<sup>NRSV</sup> **Matthew 28:1** After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. <sup>2</sup> And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. <sup>3</sup> His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. <sup>4</sup> For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. <sup>5</sup> But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. <sup>6</sup> He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. <sup>7</sup> Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." <sup>8</sup> So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. <sup>9</sup> Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. <sup>10</sup> Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

On Holy Saturday in Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent*, Ethan Hawley remembers how every year his aunt would say, "Of course, Jesus is dead. This is the only day in the world's days that he is dead. And all men and women are dead, too. Jesus is in Hell. But tomorrow. Just wait until tomorrow. Then you'll see something."<sup>1</sup> And so we started keeping tonight's vigil with Jesus dead, and now that it's "tomorrow;" now that it's Easter, we certainly have "seen something!" In my Merriam-Webster dictionary, the first definition of *vigil* is, "a watch formerly kept on the night before a religious feast with prayer or other devotions." "Formerly kept . . ." Well, it's not the only time we Episcopalians have been anachronistic, and we tend to enjoy it! Waiting itself has largely been made an anachronism, for that matter.

The vigil part, the waiting, of our Great Vigil of Easter centers around readings from the Hebrew Scriptures, and responding with psalms or canticles, and prayer. The vigil is also like a traditional wake, where people get together and tell family stories. The Prayer Book provides nine stories from the Bible, and at my seminary we'd do all nine, although in the parish the most I've figured I could get away with has been five. Since we always read the story of crossing the Red Sea, over two years' time we get to hear all nine lessons. (By the way, at my seminary, "Alleluia. Christ is risen," was planned to coincide with full sunrise. So depending on whether daylight savings time had started, the service would begin at 5:30 or 4:30 in the morning. Just a word to the choir: Don't worry; I'm not planning to go there!) Now nobody complains about nine scripture readings at Christmas Lessons and Carols, because of all the gorgeous music comes in between. But our keeping vigil is deliberately austere, with simple psalms between the lessons, appropriate to the only day of the world's days when Jesus is dead.

---

<sup>1</sup> (New York: Bantam, 1962), 56.

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary go to Jesus' tomb to keep vigil; it was customary to watch at a grave for three days. But even in grief they don't shirk their religious observance; keeping Sabbath comes first; then they go to the tomb, and boy, do they "see something!" An angel rolls away the stone from the tomb; it's an earth-shaking event, terrifying the guards. Does Matthew narrate Jesus' actual resurrection? No, and the other Gospel writers don't either. We see the *results* of resurrection without watching it actually happen. "Don't be afraid," the angel tells the two Marys; "Jesus who was crucified is not here; for he has been raised, as he said.

Come and take a look for yourselves! Now go quickly and tell the disciples!" So do the women follow directions? Yes and no. They do run out of there as quickly as they can, but the "don't be afraid" part—forget about it! They leave, Matthew tells us, with fear . . . but not *just* with fear, fear and great joy—the scary-joy of news like, "Honey, I'm pregnant!" times 1000.

As they're leaving, suddenly Jesus meets them and says . . . "Greetings!?" Now there's no such thing as a perfect translation, but I'm looking for some more zing than, "Greetings!" Yes, the Greek word here was used as the equivalent of "hello," but it literally means, "Rejoice!" The women feeling scary-joy have their joy confirmed by the first word they hear from the Risen Christ, "Rejoice!" Arlene and Matt \*\*\*\*\* became part of Christ Church a little bit after the scary-joy of, "Honey, I'm pregnant!" but well before the moment of, "It's a boy!" You could draw a parallel between the nine lessons provided for the vigil and the nine months of pregnancy.

Modern medicine can do all kinds of things like induce labor, and Caesarian sections are considered safe and routine. But modern medicine hasn't devised a way to speed up gestation—so that a human fetus would develop fully in, say, five months instead of nine. In fact, one of the greatest achievements of obstetrics has been finding ways to keep babies in the womb *longer* when they show signs of being born dangerously premature. So we wait, and the nine months of pregnancy give us time to prepare as best we can physically, emotionally, and spiritually for the coming of brand-new life.

As I said, the Gospels don't narrate Jesus' resurrection; we see the results of resurrection without watching it actually happen. Tonight we began with a vigil; Jesus dead in the tomb, and now we celebrate the results of resurrection. But perhaps the most grace-filled part of the evening is that we've had the privilege of witnessing what comes in between--of seeing resurrection take place. We watched Dylan receive the water of baptism that buried him with Christ in his death and rebirthed him by the Holy Spirit to share in the risen life of Jesus Christ our Savior.

The two Marys saw results of the resurrection—a stone rolled aside by a flashy angel guards about to wet their pants, a tomb clean as a whistle . . . *and then they went and did something about it!* Now is the "tomorrow" we've been waiting for, in Ethan Hawley's aunt's way of speaking; "Then you'll see something," she promises. What have we seen? God's miracle of a child born in October receiving God's miracle of being reborn into resurrection life, and we promised to do something about it, too, remember? "Continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship . . . persevere in resisting evil . . . proclaim by word and example the Good News

of God in Christ . . . seek and serve Christ in all persons . . . strive for justice and peace among all people, . . .” to name a few.

We don’t celebrate Easter every year because it was a one-time event. We celebrate Easter every year because God makes it just as powerful in our lives as in the lives of Mary Magdalene, the other Mary, Peter, James & John, and all the rest. Now Easter is just as powerful in Dylan’s life, and the something we’ll see together in all of our tomorrows is the ongoing result of Christ’s resurrection—doing something about it day by day, year by year. This way of living is every bit as much of a miracle as the ones we’ve celebrated and witnessed tonight.