

Easter Vigil – Matthew 28:1-10
St Andrew's Episcopal Church - Sedona, AZ

Rejoicing in New Life

A few years ago, when I was serving as seminarian at St. John's in Oakland, California, I had a deeply spiritual experience of death and resurrection. It was the custom at St. John's to invite people who had lost a loved one that year to carry the cross at the Good Friday service. My uncle had died a few months earlier that year. Even though I had sung at his funeral, I thought that carrying the cross on Good Friday would be another meaningful way to honor his life and our shared life as Christians. Little did I know that Jesus would show up in a meaningful and transformative way for me. There were about five of us carrying the cross – all women. As we processed down the aisle, a female singer chanted the Anthems. When we arrived at the chancel, we lifted the cross straight up and placed it in the steel holder. Then we stood in the shadowy darkness at the foot of the cross.

When the soloist finished singing, we exited through a side door and passed through the terrace garden amidst the flowering trees and into the starlit night. After the service, I spoke with some of the other women who carried the cross with me. I told them that I felt like we were the women who had witnessed Jesus' crucifixion, and that after his death we experienced his resurrection and new life as we went out into the garden and breathed in

fresh air under the night sky. Several of the women had a similar spiritual experience. It was as if our lives had been resurrected with new possibilities and new hope despite our shared grief at the loss of a loved one. It was as if we had become reconnected with our loved ones and each other in a new way through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

My spiritual experiences of God are often enhanced when I reconnect with the nature. And even more so when I am singing in the midst of the created world with others in my faith community. Probably it is for this reason that the Great Vigil of Easter has become one of my favorite liturgies. I love that we start our worship service outside around a new fire, with singing under the stars. I love how the *Exsultet* begins by inviting all of heaven and earth to rejoice in Jesus' victory over death by singing! I love that the service moves from darkness to light as we share the sacred stories of salvation history, beginning with the story of humanity's connection with our life-giving God and all that has life. There is much beauty in these images and hopefulness in these stories. I imagine that one of the most memorable times we rejoice by singing with a chorus of angels is at the nativity of Jesus. And I imagine that one of the most memorable accounts of an angel appearing to share good news is when Gabriel announces to Mary that she would be God's mother.

Like the *Exsultet*, tonight's Gospel passage from Matthew invites our imaginations to envision what it was like to be present with God at the Creation, the Annunciation, the Incarnation, and the Resurrection; and to celebrate new experiences of those holy moments in our own lives. The Gospel narrative begins after the Sabbath, a holy day of rest and renewal; a sacred time to reconnect with God, and to be refreshed by God. It is the first day of the week, when we begin again with new energy, new life, and new hope. Dawn is beginning to break forth. It is a new day to rejoice in God's goodness and grace! It is the beginning of a new creation story. And then we remember where we are in the Gospel story. We are with two of the women who witnessed Jesus' crucifixion. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary are going to Jesus' tomb to honor his life and their relationship with him. When suddenly an earthquake shakes them out of their sorrowful mourning. The world shifts and we sense that the cosmic order has been interrupted by God's action. We sense heaven and earth re-connecting when an angel of the Lord appears and announces that Jesus has been raised. Everything has been changed by Jesus' death and resurrection. Everything.

This angel's annunciation begins in the usual way with the calming words, "Be not afraid." Unlike the men guarding the tomb, the women do not become catatonic. They pay attention to the angel's announcement, for the angel understands how they are feeling and why they are there. And then they

join with the angel in rejoicing that Jesus has been raised from the dead. Christ, the Messiah is alive! Naturally their joy is mixed with wonder and fear. For this good news is almost too good to be true. Yet with urgency and excitement, they go to proclaim the good news to the other disciples. And then the improbable becomes not only plausible but possible. The two women become the first witnesses of the resurrected Jesus; the first to see him, hear his voice, touch his feet, and worship him. Jesus chooses them, two women, to become his first apostles to spread the good news. Both the angel's annunciation and Jesus' commissioning bring new life to the two women. Jesus revives their spirits and their hope of resurrection joy with him in this life and the next.

The good news is not only that Jesus is risen from the dead, but that he will meet his disciples in Galilee. The followers of Jesus will see him again, and many more will be commissioned to share the good news to the ends of the earth. The Good News of Jesus Christ has been shared from generation to generation. At some point in our lives, the Good News has been shared with us and we have been sharing it with other people. We share the Good News because we, too, have been commissioned in baptism as followers and proclaimers of the Risen Christ. We are called to come and see what God has done for us, and to go and tell others what a resurrected life with Christ looks like and feels like in our daily lives. Living a resurrected life with Christ means

embodying the good news in thought, word, and deed. The Good News is that Jesus offers a world of new beginnings and new life every morning. The Good News is that Jesus transforms hearts from fear into hope. The Good News is that Jesus brings healing and wholeness.

When our hearts are troubled by sorrow or grief, Jesus is there. When our hopes are dashed by disappointing news or difficult situations, Jesus is there. When our world is shaken up by an earthquake or a broken relationship, Jesus is there. He may not look like the Jesus you saw in paintings or picture Bibles as a child. But Jesus is here, and here, and here, and here. Jesus is in you and in me and in all of creation. Jesus is always creating and re-creating new life and new possibilities with us and for us. May we be alert to the presence of the Risen Christ in our lives, and share his unending love with the world with rejoicing and singing.

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