

Easter Vigil March 26, 2016 The Night of Conscious Love

This is the Night – quotes from the Exsultet

- When all who believe in Christ are delivered from the gloom of sin and restored to grace and holiness of life
- When Christ broke the bonds of death and hell
- When wickedness is put to flight and innocence and joy are restored. Peace and concord reigns

This is the Night – We're at the Western edge of a wave of Vigil celebrations, and it will continue as some churches gather in the early morning hours (SSJE – 4 am) instead of at night. So, for 24 + hours this hymn and dedication of Candle that is an outward symbol of the inward earthquake, the reformation of the human condition, this Candle will be dedicated and then remain lit for 50 days until the festival of Pentecost.

This is the Night. Pilgrims from all over the planet have gathered this week in and around Jerusalem to follow literally in the footsteps of Jesus as he traveled triumphantly through the eastern gate of Jerusalem and was acclaimed by those who saw hope in this coming – hope for a new kind of life – a hope that was dashed on the small hill of Calvary several days later. These same pilgrims have visited sites where the great events supposedly took place – the Upper Room, the Mount of Olives, the Garden of Gethsemane, the prison cell where he spent the night, Pilate's palace, the Via Dolorosa, Calvary and finally, the tomb.

This is the Night. In Jerusalem today, they are just waking up to the dawn and gathering for first celebrations of Easter Day. The place to be is the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. It is not a pretty space. Located outside the gates of what was the city of Jerusalem in Jesus' day, it is a kind of box with two domes that was originally two churches – one over the hill of Calvary, the other over the tomb. The sites were initially identified and revered when Helena, mother of Constantine, went in 325 CE to Jerusalem to find the “true cross”. Her discoveries of the hill and a nearby tomb became pilgrimage sites almost instantaneously. The whole city and various iterations of the church have been

destroyed by fires, invaders and the fights of the crusades. It's a kind of numbing place where you can climb

worn stairs to a spot on Calvary which is now under an altar and reach down in a hole to touch the rock that is the presumed resting place of the cross. Then down other steps to a long stone with anointing oil spread all over it, where his body might have been laid for preparation and then around the central part of the church to a long line waiting to get into the tomb. As someone remarked it's almost like Disneyland, only without the light music and joy. Instead there is a kind of hushed reverence.

Just outside the entrance to the tomb stand many paschal candles, some are huge. Many are electrically lighted (though only one was lit when we were there). Some have real candles perched on top which have been burned and there is wax that has dripped down. They are all dirty. Getting in to the tomb was somewhat of an ordeal, not only in waiting, but in the pushing and shoving of people. We carried tapers in, lit them and left them, but somehow it was hard to believe that this was the place.

What kept running through my mind were the words from the Gospel of Luke: *Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here. He is risen.* And I realized that the specific places were not important. What I knew deep in my soul was that we were standing on Ground Zero for a whole new way of understanding and seeing and living the gift of life.

This is the Night! We don't say: This was the Night or let us remember the night when . . . This **is** the Night!

And in this Night there is one who waits in love and sorrow. The four Gospels testify to the presence of one who did not abandon him. One who was tethered to him in love. That one, you know, is Mary Magdalene. She was there all along, having followed him from Galilee where she was healed, and she is specifically mentioned at the foot of the cross. She is one who watched as he suffered and died. The steadfast one who was there as he was taken down from the cross. Matthew tells us that Joseph of Arimathea took him down, wrapped him in a cloth and placed him in a tomb. He rolled a large stone to cover the entrance and then left. Matthew then says: "*Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.*" They were keeping vigil, just as we have kept this night. For Mary Magdalene it was a vigil of unbounding conscious love.

A number of years ago when I was serving as a rector in a parish, I received a call late at night – the spouse of one of my parishioners was dying. I went immediately and together we sat at his bedside. He was not a religious man, but she was very devout and loved him deeply. We said the prayers together, anointed him for the journey ahead and kept vigil until he died. The moon was streaming through the window and giving us all the light we needed. The room was full of love and the presence of life. My parishioner said that she was not ready to call the funeral home, that she wanted to sit awhile. I told her to do what was needed and that it was fine to wait. She kept vigil all that night and made the call in the morning. Her love, consciously given, walked him through the door into the life that abounds and she knew it.

What happened during that time that Jesus lay in the tomb? Our Apostle's Creed, one of the earliest forms of expression of our faith, the one we will say at the renewal of our baptismal vows in just a few moments, tells us: *He descended to the dead*. While Mary Magdalene waited near the body of one she loved more than she would ever have imagined, Christ went to the place where there is no life, no hope, no love, no God. The tradition calls it the "harrowing of hell" because the essence of hell is where there is no life and it would be harrowing to visit there. Jesus must have known that Mary was holding the space of conscious love for him; she was keeping vigil while he brought together what we had divided. Jesus went there because we all need to know that, in the words of the letter to the Romans, "*nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God*". The love of God is the essence of our life and its creative force. Love unites and creates the new. Christ took love into the darkest of places in order that we may know we are One in Him, no matter what our circumstances. Mary Magdalene must have been a part of that work, as she held the space of conscious love open during that Vigil.

We often sing or say that Christ defeats or tramples death. I believe that what really happens is that love is stronger than death. I'm talking about love that is freely offered from the heart, not as a feeling but as an intention. Love that is intentionally, consciously offered in whatever situation you are in. Such love involves a giving up of self, a willingness to see oneself in the other, a recognition that we are connected. This is what Jesus did on the cross. This, I believe, is what Mary Magdalene did as she stayed with him all the way. Such Love unbinds the power of death and creates new life. Mary Magdalene's love, Christ's love – both so transformative that she was the one who would be there to greet him, to recognize him at the dawn of eternal life.

And so it happens. After the night is over, she returns to the tomb and discovers what surrendered conscious love has brought about. And Jesus tells Mary to tell the disciples – Go to Galilee. Don't hang around the empty tomb. Don't cling to me. Go forward into the new life that we have unleashed through the power of love. Look for me with the eye of your heart.

Some 80 miles north of Jerusalem lies the village of Capernaum on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. The Via Maris (or sea road) is part of the ancient Silk Road connecting east to the Mediterranean Sea and goes down into Egypt. It winds its way around the northern end of the Sea of Galilee and down the west side, through the town of Magdala, Mary's home village and keeps on going. Jesus says that this is the place the disciples should go - away from the bustle and hustle of Jerusalem. You will see me in the places where you fish and build and teach and lead, where you love and live, where you play and die. You will see me at home as you love one another as I have loved you.

This is the Night of conscious love. This is the night when our life as Christians truly begins, when we join Mary Magdalene in the journey of love that transforms this life on the planet! God is love and when we love intentionally with conscious awareness, we manifest the life of God in ourselves to the world and see that life in others.

This is the Night – our Ground Zero – our new beginning that continues to unfold. And we, along with Mary Magdalene and the disciples, are told to go home. Go back to your communities, your schools, your places of work, your shops, your friends and family. Go and look. See with new eyes of the heart – the eyes of conscious love. “See me”, Christ says. Look for me. Love me as yourself. I am there.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!