

Sermons at Saint Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual; nourishment; A river of service in Jesus' Name

Easter Vigil

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How is it possible that twelve men and some women took on the powerful Roman Empire and succeeded? These men and women were not people with some extraordinary means; they were mostly fishermen-ordinary people. However, their status in society did not restrain them from telling the improbable story of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. The horror of the crucifixion had sent the men into hiding for fear of their own lives. And so early on the first day of the week, the women went to visit the tomb.

For Jews, visiting the tomb was customary, but it wasn't the men who first visited Jesus' tomb, it was the women-Mary, and Mary Magdalene. All the four gospel writers make it a point to highlight that it was women who first went to the tomb. In a patriarchal society where cultural biases discounted the evidence of women, you would wonder why all the gospel writers seem to agree on this particular fact.

On their way to the tomb, the women wondered aloud about the stone-because they knew they could not roll it by themselves, and might need some help. But as it turned out, they no longer had to worry about the stone anymore because when they came close enough to see the tomb, they realized that the stone had already been rolled away.

For a minute they probably thought that someone had beaten them to the tomb, and whoever it was, was someone they most likely knew. To their amazement, they saw no one they knew, but rather a young man sitting in the tomb, who gave them a piece of information that would highly motivate this group of uneducated men and women to take on the Jewish establishment, the Roman empire and change the course of both our human and salvation story.

Beginning with the story of Noah, God has always sought to deliver God's people; not only from their sins but even from themselves and to restore humanity's broken relationship with God. The story of Noah reflects God's desire to wipe out the scourge of sin from the earth, to recreate the earth and to begin a new relationship with humanity.

Those that He saved from the flood, God established a covenant with them using the rainbow as a symbol of that covenant. What sounds incredible is that God reached out to save humanity in order to begin a new creation with the redeemed, but in order to save some, God had to destroy others.

In the story of the Exodus, God through Moses called on Pharaoh to free the people of Israel who were under slavery. Pharaoh bargained with the life of his people until he finally let go. But an unrepentant Pharaoh decided to pursue the people of Israel. When they saw the advancing Egyptian army, they began to cry out to God. In spite of all the miracles that God performed in Egypt, they cried out in fear and in anger.

God responded with the parting of the Red Sea, and so the people of Israel walked on dry ground, while the same Sea swallowed up the entire Egyptian army. The crossing of the Red Sea in a way marked a break with the past; a past that was characterized by slavery and suffering; and ushered them to a new beginning at the other side of the Sea. A new life which will be marked by a new relationship with God, a new life that will be shaped by faith in God, a new life which will be lived in freedom, in recognition of God's saving grace and in their responsibility towards each other and to God.

Having been saved from the Egyptians by God, we also must acknowledge the reality of a God who reaches out to save in order to begin the process of building a new creation with the redeemed. But in order to save some, God had to destroy others.

If the traditional understanding of God's saving act involves the destruction of others in order to save others, then what the crucifixion implies is a new method, a new approach where God doesn't have to destroy others to save others, but God had to offer God's self in order to save all those who respond to the invitation that the prophet Isaiah extends "Ho, everyone that thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price."

Who is it that buys without money? We all need money: cash, debit card, credit card, check or wire transfer to buy something. But Isaiah's point is not about anyone's purchasing power or ability, for if we have to buy with money, if we have to pay a price for it, that would not only have been exclusionary but that idea in itself would have perpetuated the traditional notion of a God who saves others through the destruction of others.

But if there has been a true shift, then that shift should reflect the idea that each one is worthy of God's salvation-irrespective of how sinful and depraved we may be. We may think we do not deserve it, or are not worthy of it because of the skeletons in our closet, but remember that even the dry bones in the valley which had no life were given new life, a life for which they paid no price-a life which was free. And so to those who are thirsty, come, come and drink for free, and if you are hungry and thirsty but have no money, come, come buy and eat, for free.

For tonight, by virtue of the resurrection and our baptism, we have crossed from the other side of the Sea, where we were under the slavery of sin, and therefore thought we were not good enough to be saved by God. But we are now on the other side of the Sea, where we belong to a community whose new life in God cannot be separated by any failures, for we can return to God again, and again for forgiveness and restoration.

For tonight, by virtue of the resurrection and the baptism that flows from it, we have been raised with Christ and have been offered a new life-a new message, to walk in newness of life.

Come to think of it, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead was an extraordinary event, and for the women who were the first to have gotten the message that Jesus was raised, it was awe-inspiring and mystifying. It took time for them and the other disciples to absorb the implications of the resurrection, but with time it became self-evident that God had indeed, by virtue of the resurrection, validated the teachings, life and death of Jesus.

If God through the resurrection vindicated Jesus, then the community that grew around him and followed his manner of life could not be destroyed by enmity, hostility, aggression or death. This is a new community that will be shaped by a life of repentance, mutual forgiveness and service- a community that will endure despite its challenges with sin, evil and death.

As life transforming and incredibly mystifying as the resurrection may be, by itself alone, the resurrection has nothing to confirm, nothing to validate. But in so far as we have come to love Jesus, and follow the path that he has carved for us, we can understand the resurrection as being part of a broader story that leads us into God's kingdom, a kingdom against which sin, evil nor death could prevail.

The two women left the tomb with this improbable and amazing story, Jesus has been raised. For them, Jesus' resurrection came to mean that God's power is invincible to all manner of forces, and so off they went with a simple message- God through the resurrection of Jesus vindicates life, validates life and whether we will repent and follow him. Many believed and followed, and so should we. Amen