

The Easter Vigil
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
Saint Francisville, LA
31 March 2018

Mark 16: 1-8

The first few days after someone you love dies are very surreal. You feel a void that is difficult to describe. This void comes from the deepest recesses of your mind and the most profound depths of your heart. Your sadness is so overwhelmingly strong that some of us feel we will never recover from it. You wonder how your life will ever be the same without the person you lost. You feel hungry, but you can find no energy or desire to eat. You feel exhausted, but you can't fall asleep. You feel angry, but in most cases you don't know who to blame and who to be angry at. All at once you feel out of place, insecure, and lost. And your mind begins to play a continuous loop of memories, good and bad, about the person. And you hold on to those precious memories because you know that your memories are all you have left and that to give them up is to acknowledge that you have lost the person forever. You are comforted by those around you and, at the same time, you wish all of them went home and left you alone. You know you have to plan a funeral, but you wish you didn't have to make any of the decisions that need to be made. You want to fall apart and crawl into a ball, but you have to remain strong for the sake of your children and relatives, who, secretly, feel very uncomfortable with your pain and anguish. You feel like dying yourself and, yet, you know that you must go on.

This is how the family, disciples, and close friends of Jesus are feeling today. They feel defeated and confused. They had such high hopes for Jesus, but all those hopes have been crushed forever. Could they have been wrong about him? Did they see in him just what they wanted to see. Was he the wrong Messiah? They are terrified of the authorities because they know that after the leader of a movement is killed, usually his followers are rounded up next and imprisoned or killed. They feel suspicious of anyone they encounter and, yet, they know they can't escape until Passover is over and all the military forces and the thousands of visitors have left the city. For now, all they can do is hide and pray. Hide and remember. Hide and mourn the loss of their friend, the loss of a dream for a victorious insurrection against Rome, the crushing loss of defeat.

They had so hoped Jesus was the one to liberate Israel. But, they were wrong. It was all so exciting at first that they fooled themselves into thinking that their beloved friend was the announced Son of David. Of course they are not to be blamed for falling in love with Jesus. When you were in his presence, you felt as the most important person in the world. He always made you feel like no one else mattered as much as you at that moment. He could read into your soul and see your deepest needs, aspirations, and fears. And he always had a word of healing and a word of comfort. He was such a charismatic leader. It was easy to love him. It was easy to dream about a better future when you were in his presence. He was so close to God that being with him was like being in God's own presence. But, now he is gone, and all you have left are the memories, the void in their hearts and minds, and their fear. Now, a big rock separates them from their beloved friend. A rock that acts as a barrier

between the living and the dead. Their aspirations and dreams were buried with Jesus of Nazareth and all that is left is a rock as a symbol of their failure.

To make matters worse, they feel quite guilty that they did not do for Jesus what was customary at a time of burial. According to Mark, Joseph of Arimathea barely had enough time to place the body in a tomb before Passover began. The disciples know that as soon as Passover is over some of them must go to the tomb and cover the body with spices and anoint the body with oils. After this, the body would have to be carefully wrapped in linen clothes and carefully placed in his final resting place. This was the tradition and the women knew that, even if the task proved dangerous, they must go to the tomb and do this final act of love towards their teacher and friend. In Mark we don't hear about soldiers placed at the entrance of the tomb, and we don't hear of any fears from the disciples that the body might be stolen by anyone during the night. Not having soldiers at the tomb and not having the disciples come with them to the tomb, for fear of the authorities, means that the women have a problem. They have no one to roll the stone from the entrance of the cave for them. This is a problem they will have to solve before they prepare the body for his eternal rest.

Unbeknown to the dispirited women on their way to the tomb, and to the disciples hiding behind locked doors and windows for fear of the Jews, God's plans had come to fulfillment sometime in the middle of the night. God's eternal plan of salvation had been fully realized. The one destined to crush the serpent's head of Genesis 3:15 had finally defeated death; the blameless Lamb of Genesis 22 had been sacrificed and now lived forever; the prophet promised by Moses in Deuteronomy 18:1 had finally arrived to lead God's people the rest of the way; the Suffering Servant of Isaiah had finally been vindicated; God himself had heard the cries of humanity past, present, and future and had risen his Son from the dead to free them from captivity and to bring them safely home.

As the women arrive at the tomb they find that the stone has been rolled away. The separation between them and their Master had been removed. They now have direct access to Jesus, whom they presume is dead. When they enter the tomb they find a young man dressed in white, waiting for them. He tells them, "Do not be alarmed, you are looking for Jesus Christ, who was crucified. He has been raised. He is not here." Jesus no longer dwells among the dead, he is now alive and there is no rock impeding our access to him. He is alive and no power will ever be able to roll that stone back. No power, no conflict, no sin, no failure, no doubt, no fear, no crisis, no financial reversal, and no threat will ever separate us from Christ Jesus, our Lord. The stone has been rolled and he now dwells among us, alive and filled with power and glory. He is alive, which means we are alive in him. We are free. We have been rescued. Today is our independence day. Christ has conquered evil and sin on our behalf. And he will guide us to the end of times, he will bring light to the darkness of our lives until we are safely reunited to our Father. In him we have victory and redemption. In him we have life eternal and nothing will ever be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Today as redeemed children of God, we exclaim,

Alleluia, Christ is risen! the Lord is risen, indeed, Alleluia.