

Easter Vigil, Year A, 2014
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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They were so
tired.
It had been a long week.
First
that crazy, joyous
morning,
Jesus processing into the city
on the back of a donkey,
crowds everywhere,
waving and shouting.
And then the long days,
the Lord teaching
in the temple precincts,
and their job
to find food for him and his disciples,
so caught up in listening
that they had forgotten
to eat.
They heard snatches of his stories,
foolish bridesmaids unprepared for a wedding,
the great banquet
where the invited guests
ignored their invitation
and the host threw open the doors
to the poor and unloved,
and that greatest commandment of all
Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. And
love your neighbor as yourself.

But most of the time
they were too busy to simply sit
and listen,
too busy
getting the laundry done
and the food sorted
and the feast prepared.

Not that they
were invited.

That dinner,
the dinner that proved to be
his last meal,
he had spent that night
with his friends,
Peter and James and John and the rest of them.
Then to the garden to pray,
but late at night
it was not a place
for women
alone,
and so they went home
unsuspecting,
never knowing
that he would be betrayed
and arrested
and sentenced to die.

By the morning
it was too late.
The verdict had been given.
Guilty.
Death.
And when they finally caught up with him
he had already been
nailed to the cross
and hoisted
into place.
Dying.

All around him
soldiers and crowds,
jostling and jeering.
Bandits calling
from the crosses either side.

But the disciples
the privileged ones
invited to that last meal,
they were nowhere to be seen.

So the women
found a quiet space, back, hard against the city wall,

safe from the rough crowd
come to taunt the dying men,
and all to ready
to take advantage
of a couple of unaccompanied women.
And there they waited,
waited and watched
helpless to ease their Lord's pain.
Waiting
until they could do him their last service,
women's work,
washing him
and laying him out
for burial.

But in the end
they didn't even get
to do that.

A rich man, expert in politics
and the way to get things done,
secret followers of Jesus,
Joseph his name,
he went to Pilate,
and asked for the body.
And took it away
and wrapped it in
a linen shroud,
and buried it
in his own tomb.

And all the women could do
was watch helplessly.
And so, denied the chance
to do that final service,
they took it upon themselves
to keep watch,
all that evening,
and on, into the night.

Next morning,
they were still watching, still waiting,
when some soldiers arrived.

“It’s the sabbath. You have no business here. You should be home with your families. Get out of here.”

So they went home. And fed the disciples, again. And watched. And waited.

And then early the next morning,
just as sky
began
to lighten,
before there was any trace
of gold on the horizon,
they wrapped up warmly,
waited at the city gates
until the guards, sick of their pleading,
opened them just enough
for them to squeeze through,
and hurried out
to the tomb.
Hoping
that the soldiers who had turned them away before the sabbath
had been replaced,
maybe even
left, now that the sabbath
was over.

The dew was cold
on their feet;
the fig trees and olives and vines
casting ghostly shadows.
Finally
they arrived at the tomb,
the trampled earth
and new-hewn rock
marking the place
where he
had been buried.

But as they came near,
suddenly the earth
began to shake.
They threw themselves to the ground, terrified.
And when the shaking subsided,

the raised their heads
and saw
there,
a gaping hole,
soldiers
unconscious
beside it.

And to the side
the stone,
and from above
a bright light,
and as they shakily dragged themselves
to their feet
they saw
that it wasn't so much a light
as a person
or something like one,
a figure
dressed in blinding white.
And then it...or he...spoke
"Do not be afraid."
Words that they had heard before,
heard from Jesus' mother's lips
as she told them, time and time again,
of the angel that had visited her
when she first knew
she was to have a son.
And the first thing
that angel said
was "Do not be
afraid."
And now, was this an angel too?

"Do not be afraid. I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. 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.'"

And the women looked
at that gaping hole,
and suddenly afraid,
they turned

and ran,
feet stumbling,
hoping
that the gates would be open now,
or that the guards
would take pity on them
again,
the shadows
lurching and swaying
around them.

So that they didn't see him
until he was right
in front of them.
"Greetings!"

And looking up,
they saw him.
Jesus.
Who should have been dead,
should have ben
in that gaping hole.
They had seen him die.
They had seen his body
carried away.
They had seen the spices,
the linen cloth.
They had seen the stone,
pushed tight, sealing
the tomb.
But there he was,
defying all logic,
there he was, right in front of them.

And they grabbed hold of his feet.
Too afraid
to look him
in the face,
afraid
of what they would see.

"Do not be afraid," he said.
"Do not be afraid."

Just like the angel
by the gaping hole.
Just like the angel
announcing his birth.
“Do not be afraid.”

And they turned,
and ran back
towards the city gates,
and they were open now,
the sun up,
and they went to the disciples, stumbling over
their words.

“Go to Galilee. We have seen him; go to Galilee, he said. We saw him. An angel. First. And
the soldiers, unconscious. We were afraid,
we were coming back to tell you,
and then there he was, in front of us. Go to Galilee.”

And in the babbling and the relief,
somehow
the message got through.
And the disciples
went
to Galilee.
And there Jesus
appeared to them,
and gave them the commission
that we call great.

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of
the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded
you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

We
are inheritors
of that day.
Of the women
who were not invited
to the last supper,
but yet were faithful,
watching and waiting,
and God honored them
by making them

the first witnesses
of the resurrected Christ.
Seeing their Lord,
whom they thought dead,
seeing him
face
to face.

And of the disciples,
who took seriously
the women's words,
and set out for Galilee,
a week long journey,
the last place
they wanted to be
far from the tomb
of their leader,
but trusting
that what the women had seen,
whatever had changed them
from grieving, fearful, ashamed,
to urgent, passionate, believing,
trusting
that it was true,
we are inheritors
of the commission
that Christ gave them.
To go,
tell others,
teach them,
baptize them,
and above all
let them know
that fear and death no longer
have power over us,
that life - and God - has won!

Or in the words
of that great early church preacher, John Chrysostom, John the gold-mouthed,
who spoke these words
one Easter
sixteen centuries
ago.

O death, where is your sting?
O hell, where is your victory?
Christ is risen, and you are cast down!
Christ is risen, and the demons are fallen!
Christ is risen, and the angels rejoice!
Christ is risen, and life is set free!
Christ is risen, and the tomb is emptied of its dead.
For Christ, having risen from the dead,
is become the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep.
To Christ be glory and power forever and ever. Amen!

Christ is risen! Alleluia!
The Lord is risen indeed! Allelluia!