

Year B, Easter Vigil
Genesis 1:1-2:2
Exodus 14:10-15:1
Isaiah 55:1-11
Ezekiel 37:1-14
Zephaniah 3:12-20
Romans 6:3-11
Mark 16:1-8

The Rev. Chris Fair Beebe
St. Francis Episcopal Church
Rutherfordton, NC
April 4, 2015

May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer. *Amen.*

Alleluia, the Lord is Risen!

How exciting it is to be with you this evening as we begin our celebration of Easter with this Great Vigil, an ancient rite that hasn't been used at St. Francis in many years. Although we began with scriptures that recall for us God's saving deeds in the history of God's people, this evening our celebration is also marked by new things, beginning with the new fire that was kindled as we gathered together. In a few minutes, we'll celebrate the baptisms of five precious children, the beginning of their new lives in Christ our Lord, and recall our own promises to live the new lives we are drawn to through Christ. In everything we do this evening, we're remembering the New Covenant God made with God's people: that whoever believes in God's son Jesus Christ will be raised up to new life, just as our Lord was raised up on the first Easter. It's a lot to take in, this incredible story, isn't it? Yet it is the center, the completion point of our faith.

In these past three holy days, as we've remembered our Lord's last supper with his disciples, as we've mourned with his first followers over his crucifixion, as we've waited at the tomb, I've been struck numerous times with the realization that all of this is a great mystery to us today, and I've wondered how we can tell a story we barely understand ourselves. In John's version of the Passion Gospel, he notes that "He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth." So how, more than two thousand years later, has the story made its way to us in this small church in Western North Carolina?

Our Gospel lesson tonight answers that question. When the women discovered that the tomb where they looked for Jesus was empty, the angel said, "He is not here; for he has been raised. Come, see the place where he lay. Go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead...'" The Good News of our Lord's life, death, resurrection, and ascension is so powerful, so compelling, that it has been handed down through the centuries, from those women at the tomb, with both fear and great joy, by believers to new believers, by new believers to non-believers, from generation to generation.

While we rely on the written accounts of the Gospels to teach us, the truth is that the story of Jesus would not have survived without the telling of it, by one to another. Each of the Gospels tells the story differently. Tonight we hear Matthew's version. Tomorrow we'll hear Luke's version, same but different. While each of these accounts inform us and the differences between them intrigue us, the truth of what is told and written in them is solid and stable, unchanging from one telling to another. God sent God's only Son, Jesus Christ, so that all who believe in him may have life everlasting. Jesus died a terrible death, was laid in the tomb, and on the third day rose again. New life begins with this story that is the foundation of our faith. As incredible as it may seem, we profess to believe it. And if we truly believe it, we *must* tell it!

And so, tonight, through our worship and in the baptism of these children, we are promising not only to do everything in our power to support them in their new life in Christ, but to tell the story to them and to others. And one day these children and others who hear about the Good News from us will in turn tell others about the new life that comes to us through the death and resurrection of our Lord!

My friend Delmer Chilton, Lutheran minister and storyteller extraordinaire, tells about a pastor from South Carolina who was invited by one of his parishioners to attend a baptism. The

parishioner was a guard at the Central Carolina Prison in Columbia, and that was where the baptism was to take place. The pastor arrived there early in the morning and was searched, IDed, interrogated, and taken from waiting area to waiting area for over an hour; all to simply move him fifteen feet from outside the prison walls to the inside.

Finally the pastor met his guard friend and they walked together down long, cold corridors to the prison chapel. It was a small room, with a few rows of chairs and a platform at the front. On this day the pulpit and piano had been pushed to the side against the wall. In the pulpit's place, flat on the floor, there was a large wooden box. In the box there was spread blue plastic sheeting that draped over the sides of the box and into the sheeting had been poured gallons and gallons of cold water.

As the small group gathered around the makeshift baptistery, at the very moment the convert stepped into the box full of water and the preacher reached over to grab his hands, lower him into the box, and began to say, "I baptize thee..." the visiting pastor had a realization that took his breath away. The box was a coffin; a standard, prison-issue, pine-box coffin. The man was being baptized in a casket. He was going into and coming up out of the grave. New life in Jesus Christ our Lord!

Tonight our baptistery is not a coffin, thank God. It is a simple but beautiful wooden baptismal font, more than one hundred years old, from which the waters of baptism have given new lives to hundreds of children, women, and men. And like those who have been baptized here before, tonight Sara, Fiona, Beau, Mackenzie, and Wesley will be born again to live their lives in the risen life of Jesus Christ our Savior, sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever. And so the incredible story of God's Good News continues to be told, now and through the ages, forever and ever.

Amen and amen.