

The Great Easter Vigil

Romans 6:3-11

Psalm 114

Luke 24:1-12

Come among us, Risen Lord, and help us find a world of new possibilities in your joyful resurrection. Amen.

At early dawn, seven years ago, the paleontologist Robert DePalma arrived at an excavation site in the Dakotas. For those who excavate fossils, this was their own type of graveyard- digging up dinosaur bones that have been long dead. But this wasn't your usual dig, for DePalma believed he made an, "incredible and unprecedented discovery" in this site. When the colossal asteroid hit the earth about 70 million years ago, most scientists have proposed that the dinosaurs had already begun to become extinct, and that asteroid simply finished them off. But DePalma had another theory. He had found the elusive layer of sediment that he believes encapsulated creatures at the time the asteroid struck. Meaning life was still thriving and only when the asteroid hit did it become extinct. No paleontologist before him has ever found this layer. Echoes of the Gospel come to mind- unlike other paleontologists who simply look for fossils, he knew in his research that the dead merely surrounded the living, and he was there to prove it. Life happening, buds on trees, fish, creation, glimpses of life in the midst of death and destruction.¹

At early dawn, two millennia ago, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other unnamed faithful women who had followed Jesus to Jerusalem from Galilee arrived at Jesus' tomb. But they found a perplexing site. The stone had been rolled away and the body of Jesus was nowhere to be found. Suddenly there appeared two men in dazzling clothes and they asked, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" Well, they weren't. They were looking for the dead among the dead. Reeling from shock and grief, bringing along prepared spices for Jesus' body, there would be no

¹ "The Day the Dinosaurs Died." <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/04/08/the-day-the-dinosaurs-died>

reason to look for the living in a graveyard. They witnessed what happened on the cross. But the messengers spoke into and through that shock and terror- "remember what Jesus told you." And they did. They were the ones who supported Jesus' ministry throughout his life, they watched his trial and crucifixion, they were witness to his burial when the great stone was rolled over the tomb. And they were there in the aftermath to show care and love to their friend and teacher. When the picture became clearer, when they could see through the blur of grief and hopelessness, they remembered. He is not here, he has risen, just like he said he would.

As we celebrate the first service of Easter in Jesus' resurrection, as an Easter people, the church helps us remember to stop looking for the dead among the dead. When terrible things happen, it's easy to fall back old habits. It's easy to spiral into feelings that all hope is lost. There's nothing good here. In the multitudes of heartbreak and tragedy, we get pulled into the grim details. What other bad things can I dwell on, we ask ourselves? There is another way though- instead, we too can look for the living among what we perceive as no longer alive. Through readings and songs and stories of our community, God shows us that God always strives to bring life to situations we think are dead. In creation, there was only a formless void and darkness. But God spoke, bringing about all creation and life. For the Israelites, journeying in the desert, generations of oppression, slavery, and death looked better than what was in front of them. But then God showed them the way to life and parted the Red Sea. For those in the darkness of exile, God sent the prophets to preach a message of life and hope. A message that there is a future.

We've all been guilty though, skeptical of these incredible and unprecedented discoveries. When a loved one dies in an unexpected or a shocking way, sometimes it takes a while for us to understand that they're truly gone. Can you imagine what it would be like the other way around? They're not dead, don't worry, they're alive! We've all questioned whether something is really true. But the fact of the matter is, we need voices like those who dig up great discoveries or those like the women's voices, some named, most unnamed, to courageously speak up and proclaim resurrection. The Good News of the Gospel wouldn't be here today if those women didn't use their voices to tell the apostles. Eventually, Peter made his way to the

tomb, but it seemed that action was more about his disbelief and doubt than his belief in the women's news. The difference between the women and our paleontologist and even Peter was intention. The paleontologist knew he was looking for the living not the dead. Peter, he just wanted to prove the gossip and drivel of the women wrong. And the women? They got it. The women remembered and believed in God's unending and limitless love.

What intention did you bring with you tonight? Or, what brought you here tonight? Maybe you needed a little extra hope. Maybe you suffered loss recently and can't quite find resurrection but needed to be bolstered by the community. Maybe this whole scene isn't for you, but you love your family that brought you. God works in any and all stories. Through Jesus' story- his life and ministry, serving those most deeply excluded and hurt in this world, his death on the cross, and now, his resurrection to new life, God shows us that life conquers death. Hope abounds! Where ever we find ourselves in God's story, we could always use a boost of life-giving resurrection to show us the joy of incredible and unprecedented discoveries. He is not here, he is Risen. Alleluia!