

## Easter Vigil Sermon, April 8, 2023

This service starts in darkness. The darkness of the tomb. The darkness of death. The darkness of deep grief, deep disappointment. The darkness of the world when evil prospers, when there is oppression and hatred, violence and fear. Like the darkness of our world sometimes. Like the darkness of our own lives sometimes, when they seem to be full of fear and anxiety and despair. Sometimes we have become so accustomed to the darkness that it seems normal, the way things have always been, the way things will always be. The darkness can creep into our hearts and minds and leave us dull.

It is in this deep darkness of the tomb that a light is kindled. It's a bit scary, so wild and bright! It even hurts our eyes a little. We might close our eyes to avoid seeing it at first. But the light stays and it lights our paschal candle and then other candles and our own candles. Colours appear. Other people appear. The world is changed.

It was in the darkness of night, in the darkness of the tomb, that God's hand reached down and raised up Jesus, that God's Spirit swept down and blew breath into his nostrils. In the darkness a spark of life. The dead Jesus stirs, takes a breath, opens his eyes. Unwraps himself from his grave clothes and leaves the tomb. He is risen! Alleluia! The angel rolls away the stone, so Mary and her companions can see that it is empty by the time they arrive at first light.

You know, we often go through life ignoring death, ignoring pain, ignoring sin and our woundedness, ignoring the darkness around and within. If we just ignore it enough, pretend it isn't there enough, perhaps it won't bother us. In any case, hopefully no one else will find out about it and look down on us. If we just keep a positive attitude and appear sunny and happy all the time, we can maybe forget the darkness. Sometimes we work really hard at this. Ignoring pain and injustice and grief takes a lot of work. But our fear of those things drives us to do this.

And the world does offer us something, some good things:  
 The world offers us peace – until there is violence or war.  
 The world offers us hope – when there are reasonable signs that things will get better.  
 The world offers us love – as long as everyone else is loving and nice. If they get nasty, watch out!  
 The world offers us joy – when things are going well, as they often do.  
 The world offers us light – as long as it's not dark out.  
 The world even offers us life – until we die.

But what Jesus offers us in the Resurrection is different. He offers us new life that is born in death, new life that has been through death, and because of that, death holds no more terrors. Death has no more dominion over us.

Jesus offers us light that is born in darkness, light that the darkness cannot understand, light that no darkness can ever overcome. Light that shines in the darkness of the world, in the darkness of our lives and dispels it.

Jesus offers us forgiveness, even as we are nailing him to the cross. He knows what we're capable of. Jesus offers reconciliation that is not based on ignoring or concealing our wrongdoings but on openly acknowledging them, becoming vulnerable, and asking forgiveness. When we conceal our wrongdoings from those closest to us, there is always that fear that one day they will discover the truth about us and despise us. But reconciliation that follows full knowledge, nothing can shake that. Jesus offers us that.

Jesus offers us peace, not peace that ignores violence but peace in the midst of violence, peace that passes all human reason.

Jesus offers us love, not the weak love that doesn't really know the person they love, conditional on us being a certain way, but the strong love that knows us through and through, good and bad, and still loves us with a love that nothing can shake.

Jesus offers us joy. Not joy that will crumble at the first hint of sadness, but joy that springs up in the midst of sadness.

Jesus offers us hope. Not hope based on a rosy pretense that all is well, but hope that is born in the midst of darkness and despair and grows in spite of their best efforts.

What Jesus offers us is hope that has gone through despair, love that has met with hatred and vanquished it without succumbing to it. Peace that passes all human understanding. Joy that is born in sorrow. Light that is born in darkness. Something much more powerful, much more sustaining than anything the world can offer. Something that can change the world.

And we've seen that happen. We've seen Martin Luther King, Jr, campaigning for human rights for his people, buoyed up by his faith in God. We've seen Mother Teresa and her nuns in the slums of Calcutta and around the world, caring for those who are dying alone. We've seen our own churches reaching out to our own communities in love, caring for those in need, walking with each other in difficult times. You can call to mind thousands of examples in your own lives of people who have cared for each other and worked, as Jesus did, to transform the world, one small step at a time.

When we let Jesus into the darkness of our tombs, our locked rooms, he sheds his healing light on us, forgives our sins, binds up our wounds, calms our fears, brings us joy in the midst of our sorrow. Jesus comes into our hearts and souls and loves us back to health, with a love that is stronger than death, stronger than fear, stronger than any darkness.

On this most holy night, when Jesus was raised from the dead, it is time for us to leave our graveclothes, all the things that bind us to death and despair, behind us in his tomb, and enter with him into the joy of new resurrection life. The power of this holy night dispels all evil, washes guilt away, restores lost innocence, brings mourners joy. Night truly blessed, when heaven is wedded to earth and we are reconciled with God.

May the light of the risen Christ dawn in the darkest corners of our lives. And may it shine always through us to the world around us. Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

