



Sermon for the Great Vigil of Easter, April 16, 2022

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

[Isaiah 65:17-25](#)

[Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24](#)

[Acts 10:34-43](#) [Luke 24:1-12](#)

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

How wonderful and holy this night, when we hear again the scriptures telling us how God has pursued us humans, sought us out, endured our wandering hearts. Just listen again to the actions we have heard that God has done for us and with us – God has created, more wonderfully restored, saved, multiplied, delivered, renewed, reborn, raised up, made new, brought to perfection.

How wonderful the celebration of this night, when the fasting and introspection of Lent are ended, when we cross the threshold into the audacity, wonder, surprise, and delight of Easter, when we remember and reassert how we crossed the threshold in baptism and took on this lifelong journey of Christian faith.

How awesome this night, when we affirm together that resurrection is possible, that life can be other than we have known, when disaster is turned on its head and made a triumph.

All through the season of Lent, our scriptures from the Old Testament and the Gospels have confronted us with relationship -- the relationship between God and humanity that has continued to bring us face to face with truth about ourselves, the world, and God, always drawing us to greater and greater intimacy. This relationship between God and humanity culminates in Jesus, in the unity -- the complete unity -- of God and human in one person. In his life, Jesus shares this mystery with us, offers us himself, empties himself, and even accepts our utter rejection of him. God set aside all prior frustration, hurt and abandonment, loving us so much as to become one of us, entering direct relationship with us on our own level, willing to accept our rejection. God entered the fray of human life in all its beauty and sorrow, suffering and celebration. God entered the maelstrom of humanity at its worst, walking and carrying a cross through its ugly realities of injustice and cruelty, betrayal, denial and abandonment. God incarnate, God-with-us emptied himself and gave himself completely in the state-approved, religion-endorsed murder of Jesus.

But the story does not end in tragedy. On this night, God triumphed over us -- and for us -- raising him in the body. And our salvation was won.

That is our bold declaration tonight. Christ has died. Christ IS risen. Christ will come again. Tonight, we begin the long journey back to Easter joy, culminating at the end of the next 50 days in Jesus' ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

And it is a journey into for the followers of Jesus. They don't immediately rise in joy and faith. They follow a very natural path into hope, trust, believing, and embracing that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead.

We begin tonight with them still in the fog of fear, grief, horror, uncertainty, and confusion after Jesus' death. They are huddled in secret, confused and afraid for their own lives. They go to the tomb to do in love what is done to care for the dead body, and are puzzled and perplexed by not finding the body there and things not going as expected. They don't believe each other's words at first (the men here especially not believing the women). They run to see for themselves, and are stunned and amazed. In the days ahead, they will walk together along country roads, trying to understand. Some return to Galilee where they had started, and some return to what they knew before, like fishing. Through all of this journey, Jesus meets them -- directly. Bit by bit, they come to allow hope to dawn, trust to rise, belief to flow, and wonder and joy to awaken. Each moment, the truth of Jesus' resurrection takes root in new ways in them.

And their first confrontation with the TRUTH of the resurrection was their visits to the tomb. The tomb, where they were first confronted by the emptiness, the absolute silence of a place that was supposed to be occupied by the remains, the memories, of what was lost...

What draws them to the tomb was first love, then hope.

Mary the mother of James, Joanna, and Mary Magdalene went with other women to the tomb to do what people have done for the dead for thousands of years. They went to cleanse and anoint Jesus' body. There was not time before sundown on the day of his death, before the beginning of the sabbath, to do this. Jesus was hurriedly laid to rest in the tomb. Now they came to take care of the body of their loved one. They came as an act of loving care. And God's messengers met them in their loving care with the life-changing message.

After they return and share their experience, even when other men scoffed and did not believe, Peter got up and ran to the tomb. He went to see for himself. He came as an act of hope – just a seed of hope that propels him to go and see even if he did not yet believe. After publicly denying his relationship with Jesus three times, this was a remarkable leap into hope and a return to the heart of his love for Jesus even despite the shame he felt about his denial of that love. He emerges from the tomb amazed and marveling – not yet believing or embracing, but stirred to amazement.

Each of the disciples had their own individual responses as they faced the mystery of Jesus' quiet resurrection, as quiet and unassuming as Jesus' birth.

What is your response? As you hear the stories shared and the words proclaimed, what is your response?

Where are you in your own life, now – your own journey through the beauty and chaos and suffering and celebration and brokenness of human life? How does that shape your response to Jesus, to this resurrection?

Kierkegaard was right. It IS a leap of faith, across a threshold as wide as the ocean, as deep as the night before the dawn, as silent as a grave. Behind you is all that you knew, expected, believed to be true. Before you is an unbelievable TRUTH, open, silent, empty. Before you is a mystery you have stumbled upon. You don't yet know what it means, but you feel the potential it has to change everything. Everything! The threshold is here, now, and WHAT WILL YOU DO NEXT? In this moment of startled wonder, silent, where will your heart turn?

This is a moment for your imagination, that holy place of possibility within you. Now, now, at the threshold, let your minds and hearts open to the question that must have just begun to form in the minds and hearts of the women at the tomb -- "Is it possible? What if it were true? What does it mean for me, and for all of us?"

I want to dial back some hours further from when the women first arrived at the tomb. I want to invite us to try to imagine Jesus' experience of rising with new life from death.

I want to invite you to consider this with me, because this is what awaits you, and me – each one of us – and this is what has already begun in each of us and among us together. This is the new creation, new life, that has already begun. This resurrected life is for everyone!

So, I want to share with you a vivid image of Christ Jesus' experience of resurrection – from the Chapel of the Resurrection at Valparaiso University in Indiana. It is one of my favorite worship spaces. Before we get to the image of the resurrection, we need to begin with the image of crucifixion and death on top of which the main chapel space is built.

Down below the main chapel space, somewhat below ground level, under the altar in the main chapel, is a somewhat dark round chapel. In the center of that chapel behind its altar is a crucifix with the body of Jesus curled over in pain. The body is sculpted in woven strips of iron that has a rusty tone. This is at the foundation of the building. We as followers of Jesus face the reality of death and of the human cruelty that killed Jesus.

But Christ rises from the tomb. So, above in the main chapel space, bright with windows all around, eyes are drawn to the front where, surrounded by stained glass windows from floor to high ceiling, a figure of Christ with arms raised high in victory in front of the cross, rises from behind the altar with arms raised heavenward. Here it is.



It is glorious! What an incredible image of the risen Christ Jesus!

This is what I want to invite you to enter – this experience of Christ rising up.

Look at this movement of Christ's body, leaping high! Look at Christ's arms, raised high in a great "Hurrah!" and embrace of God above! Look at the joy and exuberant openness of Jesus arising!

It is as if Jesus' whole being is saying "Wow!" and "Thank you!" and "Alleluia!" and "Yes!"

Join me in standing like this now. Stand up and raise your hands and heads high. Rise!

This is maybe what it means to embrace resurrection. Not as an idea. Not only as a belief or hope. Jesus embraces resurrection with everything he is – with whole heart, mind, soul, and strength.

And this gift is for us. Christ has arisen! God has gone up with a shout! And Christ brings life to those in the tombs – whatever our tombs, whatever our deaths, Christ comes to us and says, "Rise up! I am Life. Come and follow me into the risen life. This resurrection is for you!"

Once again, raise your arms and heads high! You are baptized and born to new life in Christ. Embrace the new creation that you are and that we all are in Christ Jesus, God-with-us, who has conquered death.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!