



Sermon for the Great Vigil of Easter, March 30, 2024

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

The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

[Romans 6:3-11](#)

[Psalm 114](#)

[Mark 16:1-8](#)

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

How wonderful and holy this night! From start to finish, we move through the wonder of God's great gifts to us humans. All through history, God has been creating, restoring, saving, increasing, delivering, renewing, awakening, rekindling, raising, and bringing to completion. We are part of that great tide, swept along in God's continuing movement.

How wonderful the celebration of this night! We have crossed the threshold from sorrow and grief into the audacity, wonder, surprise, and delight of Easter, when we remember and reassert how the Holy Spirit has brought us across the threshold in baptism and led us forward on this journey of new life in Christ Jesus.

How awesome this night. We taste and see that resurrection is possible, that life can be more than we have ever known. Trauma and tragedy are turned on their heads. The gift and triumph of eternal life has begun!

On this night, God triumphed over us -- and for us -- raising Jesus in the body. All the gates of death and hell are broken, shattered. The gates of heaven and the kingdom of God swing wide open. And our salvation is won. We are no longer slaves to anything in this world.

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

And here, we remember how we have come to the waters, to remember receiving what God has promised and being sealed as Christ's own forever. You were already known and loved and embraced by God, and have been since the day you were born. But this also is a threshold we have crossed -- as it says in the book of Romans, in baptism into Christ's death and raised to the new life of resurrection. The old self has been laid to rest, and we are made new. And our journey of faith continues ever onward from these waters, in this new life in which God has enfolded us and immersed us and raised us up.

As followers of Jesus, our journey together carries us into the unknown. Tonight, we mark that first moment of discovery by the three woman disciples as they went to the tomb. For these three, their journey into new life began with an unsettling surprise. They went to tend to the body of Jesus, but wondered how they would be able to roll away the stone that closed off the entrance to the tomb. And then, they encountered the unexpected. The massive stone rolled aside, the doorway to the tomb standing wide open, the body of Jesus missing, and sitting inside the tomb itself a young man dressed in clean white clothes.

You are along for this journey with them. What occurs to you as you come face to face with this sudden change of what you expected to be there? How are you reacting in this moment? What thoughts come to your mind?

I think about times in my life when I've been shaken loose from my usual expectations. Frankly, I'm not one to allow much space for surprise. There's a bit of Eeyore, and Rabbit, and Piglet, and Owl in me -- I can move through life within a mix of resignation, fitful fretting, anxious anticipation, and bookish formulas that all constrain and channel life in a direction I expect, whether I like it or not. But there are some important moments that have made all the difference and shaken me free.

I remember how in my very early teen years I felt trapped and funneled into patterns I did not like but also did not know how to escape. It was our move to another part of the country that opened new possibilities for me, for ways of living and being. And it was the open-armed welcome of the people in that community where we moved that truly changed me. I was shaken loose from my expectations of how people – peers and adults – would be toward me and toward each other.

Sometimes, we get so set that we can't quite adjust to what's new and different and unexpected, right in front of us. We're so in our typical patterns and ruts. So we need someone to help us get over the hump and face this new reality. And someone's help may rattle us, shake us up further, even as it is helping us.

So, the man in the corner of the tomb has the audacity to speak to them – as if he was waiting for them to arrive. "Do not be alarmed" (but they were!). "I know who you are looking for, the One who was killed" (how does he know them?). "He has been raised and is not here. See for yourself!" (but that's the problem – his body is not there!).

They are still shocked, rattled, frozen. Their brains are a whirl of firing neurons, their stomachs have taken turns sinking deep and leaping high, their breathing is shallow and fast. Everything is turning around and upside down – and nothing is clear yet, it is all so new. They don't know what to do next.

This moment, this wide-eyed moment of frozen time when their world is being unmade and remade all at once is the gateway of their conversion. Let's be there with them, in that moment. Let your minds open, your guts react, your breathing shift, as you see what they see – and see missing what they see missing – and hear these words.

...

We have known small moments of the unexpected. Small glimpses of what these women experienced.

Now, the time comes for taking the next step. The young man knows that they are caught in this moment that is remaking them, and that it is time for stepping forward into this new life that joins with their old life. He coaxes and coaches them onward. "Now go and tell the others. He is going ahead of you. You will see him!"

They ran, fleeing the scene. Seized by terror and amazement.

They kept it all to themselves and didn't say anything. They were gripped by fear.

And there is where the Gospel of Mark in its more original form ends. It is not a happy ending with things tied up in a bow. It is even somewhat unsatisfying of an ending. What do you mean, they didn't say anything and were gripped by fear? Where does that leave us? What happens next?

The writer of Marks seems to have wanted us as readers to have exactly those questions. In the face of the completely unexpected and unnatural, in the face of signs of death overturned and undone, but without actually seeing Jesus yet face to face, what would our first reaction be? What does it mean to experience amazement and terror together – to be so shaken with a mixture of violated expectations and unthinkable hope in an unimaginable possibility that we don't know how or what the feeling is that we are experiencing? What would our first response be if we were asked to tell others right away? What happened after the women's fear diminished – what did they do next? What would we do?

Throughout the other Gospels, in each story following Jesus' resurrection, the disciples have different responses. Some wander for a while in the fog of grief, horror, fear, and confusion. Some huddle together in secret, fearing what will come next. Some rise to do what has been done for ages for the dead, or rise to return to their earlier work, like fishing, not knowing what else to do. Some talk together, trying to make sense of what they have heard from others. Some run to see for themselves and leave amazed but not yet sure. Some doubt and want personal proof for themselves to cure their sense of loss. Each following a very natural path into hope, trust, believing, and embracing that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead. 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.

In each journey, 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.

What is your own 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, to this brazen declaration we make this night?

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 the threshold of new life. This is the threshold of resurrection that has begun for us all in Christ Jesus and awaits us all in God's continuing work of drawing all the world to himself.

Let yourself be in the moment that is that first awareness that something so incredibly unexpected has happened. Let the "Wow" and "Uhhh" and "What??" and "What does this mean?" fill your minds. Let the image begin to fill your minds, of the dead Jesus rising, awakening, all systems rekindled and electrified.

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. It is for you! It is for you! It is for me! It is for every person!

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!