

## EASTER VIGIL

Tonight we celebrate life and new birth. The Church on this night all over the world watches the hours as we enter into a new day, a new season, known as Easter. That is what keeping vigil means. That is why we take ourselves away on a Saturday night once a year to wait and watch for the Son of God to rise again. Our hope is Jesus alive. Knowing of his horrible unjust death we hope his words are true.

In a Kansas country cemetery there's a gravestone that reads: "Margaret Replogle Shore, 1921-1977, Thanks for stopping by. See you later."

That is the hope that we have that life will continue in spite of death. When it happens we repeat the story over and over. We believe that Jesus overcame death as he said he would. The women were told it happened and they chose to believe it. When they saw Jesus on the road they knew that death will NOT be the end of us. Jesus Christ came back to tell us it just isn't so.

The women were the first brave souls to approach the tomb despite its heavy guard. Matthew describes what happened as a catastrophic event. The earth shook, heaven released its power in the form of an angel, Jesus appeared like lightning and the women heard a voice. And the first message of the resurrection is its most crucial. It is the best news that even we could hear as modern Christians: "Do not be afraid!"

Do not be afraid parents, because God will teach your child wisdom and help them make the right choices. Do not be afraid you who have lost loved ones for you will see them again. Do not be afraid of those temporary losses in your life because God heals our memories, God brings relief to the weary, God our friend walks with us when we find ourselves lost and alone. No fear can overtake the one whose hope lies in the resurrection -- it frees us from fear. JESUS CAME OUT OF THE GRAVE AND HE IS ALIVE. Don't be afraid!

That's why we baptize at this service in particular. The human soul is transformed. The candidate passes through the water and is buried in Jesus death. And that one is raised to new life as the tomb is opened. And when we don't have any candidates, we go ahead and renew our vows of baptism anyway. Why? Because we grow up! When we are older it's time to take ownership of our faith. Mommy

and Daddy can only take us to church and make us sit still and listen for so long. Now it's time to stand up and believe for ourselves!

Of what were the women afraid? When they arrived at the tomb the stone had not yet been removed. Guards from the religious authorities were placed. What they experienced next was shocking. An earthquake, then they saw the stone rolled away, the bodies of the guards whose hearts stopped at the sight of the lightning appearance of Jesus and then the angel. They were told Jesus had left and they should tell the others in Galilee. They departed with a mixture of joy and "Oh my God, what happens now!"

The angel said, "He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said. Come see the place where he lay."

The women left the tomb quickly and the scripture says they left with "fear and great joy." Having a spiritual awakening is a tremendous event in people's lives. When we encounter the holy and the mystery for ourselves it becomes life changing. There is excitement in discovering for yourself that God loves you and he gave himself for you and He is present. Once we become aware for the first time of His great love and that God is with us and that we are never alone, some of us may experience joy for the first time. When we come to faith for the first time we find that we have a spiritual appetite for the things of God. We are hungry for spiritual food. We want to go to Galilee and tell others what God has done in our lives. But in our joy all we can do is take hold of the Risen Christ and worship him. Sometimes that is all we can do at the moment. Eventually we must get up and tell others the Good News.

New life in Jesus Christ is just the beginning. There is no easy road that follows. There is no promise that trouble will not find us. The women were just told not to be afraid. Yet given human nature what it is, fear creeps back in. And that is why we must be reminded each year that death is nothing to be afraid of if we have faith.

"We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." What happened to Jesus will happen to us. He is the firstborn from the dead and we follow the road that he has traveled. Alleluia! The Lord is risen indeed! Amen.