

## **Easter Vigil Sermon**

**Saint Paul, Columbia**

The Reverend Martha Harris, Priest in Charge

March 30, 2024 7 pm

The Story of Creation: Genesis 1:1-2:4a

Psalm 36: 5 - 10

Exodus 14: 10 - 31; 15: 20 - 21

Canticle 8: The Song of Moses

Ezekiel 37: 1 - 14

Zephaniah 3: 14 - 20

The Epistle: Romans 6: 3 - 11

Psalm 114

The Gospel: Mark 16: 1 - 8

### **The Miracle of God's Creation**

WOW. The Great Vigil of Easter is one of my favorite services. To celebrate the resurrection of our Savior, Jesus Christ, in the context of our salvation history - and to welcome the newest member of our Christian community through Holy Baptism - is indeed a special gift from God.

As Paul's Letter to the Romans states, when we are baptized into Christ Jesus we are baptized into this death. Just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in the newness of life.

We have been wandering in the wilderness during the past 40 days, repenting for our sins, seeking forgiveness, and signs that God is very much at work in our lives.

Tonight is the culmination of our waiting period - we have the assurance and reassurance that God is at work in each of our lives, enabling us to worship and celebrate God's loving, life-giving and liberating love.

This is the first Mass of Easter. As the candle light spread through the congregation, we signaled that Christ is RISEN. He is Risen Indeed.

We owe our gratitude to the women who first discovered that Jesus Christ was not in the stone tomb where he was placed after his crucifixion on the cross. Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Salome. They had brought spices to anoint Christ's body as was Jewish custom.

Having watched Christ's agonizing slow and painful death on the cross, they went to the tomb on the first day of the week at sunrise. Concerned about their ability to remove the heavy stone placed in front of the tomb, imagine their surprise when they discovered that

the stone had been removed and the tomb empty. When they entered, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe who told them that Jesus of Nazareth has been raised - he is not here. He commanded the women to go and tell the disciples and Peter is going ahead to Galilee.

They left in terror and amazement.

John's Gospel, which we will read tomorrow on Easter Day, tells a slightly different story of this holy encounter.

In John's Gospel, only Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb. Discovering that the tomb is empty she runs to tell Simon Peter and the other disciple (presumably John) She exclaims:

“They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have laid him.” The men went to see for themselves - Simon Peter saw the empty linen cloth that had been used to wrap Jesus' body, and his head wrap rolled up in the corner.

John, the other disciple, entered the tomb, saw the same evidence that Peter had, yet he believed.

“For as yet, they did not understand the scripture that he must rise from the dead.”

I am sure all of us can relate to the anger, shock and sheer terror of discovering that Jesus' body was missing - where did he go? Who took his body? Must have been some of the many questions racing through their heads.

Mary remained at the tomb and stood outside weeping, her mind swirling with these and many more questions.

Two angels approached her and asked why she was weeping. As soon as she explained to the angels why she was weeping, she turned around and faced Jesus - who she thought was a gardener. It wasn't until he said her name, that she recognized his voice.

*Rabbouni! (teacher)*

So much symbolism in these few sentences - the very few sentences attributed to Mary Magdalene in the New Testament - if we read between the lines, we can sense that she was one of Jesus's closest friends - a true soulmate. Many have speculated that they were married. What cannot be proved is that she was a prostitute. Maybe that is why Jesus appeared to her first - an indication of the importance she held to him - and to redeem her from these false accusations.

Jesus told her not to touch him because he had not yet ascended to his Father in heaven.

“Go to my brothers and say to them, “I have seen the Lord!”

Thank you, Mary Magdalene, for being the first person to announce the miracle of Christ’s resurrection. When others didn’t believe you, you stood by your realization that Christ had indeed risen from the grave.

Mary Magdalene continued to advocate for the reality of Christ’s resurrection long after her encounter with her Savior at the tomb.

Do you know the legend of the Red Egg and Mary Magdalene? According to legend, Mary Magdalene brought the tradition of colored eggs to life in a moment that intertwined faith, challenge, and miraculous change. At a banquet with an emperor skeptical of resurrection, an egg she held transformed from plain white to deep, resonant red as she spoke of Jesus's return from the dead.

I don’t know how many of you may have dyed Easter eggs this season. If you did and chose to dye an egg red, you can thank Mary Magdalene whose faith in God overcame the skepticism that surrounded Christ’s resurrection.

When we are baptized into the body of Christ we share in the miracle of his blessed birth, ministry, death on the cross and resurrection on Easter day. Just as we are baptized into new life in Christ, we are also baptized into new life through his death and resurrection.

In a few moments, we will share in the baptism of Wyatt James Douts, a seven year old boy who has accepted Christ as his Savior. We are blessed by his presence and by the commitment of his parents to baptize him on this most Holy Night here at Saint Paul Church.

Baptism is a sign, symbol and enactment of God's love and grace, our incarnational theology - poured out in the Holy Spirit. Through baptism, the church welcomes new members to the body of Christ.

Tonight begins Wyatt's lifelong journey in faith. He will be blessed by Holy water and marked with Chrism oil, sanctified by our Bishop the Rt. Reverend Audrey Scanlan, as Christ's own forever. We will have the opportunity to recite our own baptism vows.

Baptism is the beginning of our journeys in faith - witnessing others' baptisms gives us the opportunity to renew our baptismal covenant with God. It is truly a precious and holy moment when we baptize during the Easter vigil, when we celebrate Christ's resurrection.

Baptism is a burial in which we share in Christ's death - not as an end but as a new BEGINNING. We are united with Christ in Baptism and receive the promise of a new life in Christ.

Let us go forth and proclaim like Mary Magdalene - We have seen the Lord! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

(Repeat)i

Thanks be to God!

AMEN