

Easter Vigil Year B
 Rev. Paul J. Carling, Ph.D.

Episcopal Church at Yale
 April 3, 2021

Entering the Promised Land
 Genesis 1: 1-27, 2: 1-2; Ezekiel 36: 24-28; Ezekiel 37: 1-4; Mark 16: 1-8

Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed, alleluia!

On Holy Tuesday, over 130 clergy of our diocese gathered, in a kind of wilderness of uncertainty and grieving, to renew our ordination vows. We shared the amazing grace of welcoming former Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold as our retreat leader, and he began speaking into our present moment this way. *“The essential lesson of the Easter Vigil,”* he declared, *“is found in the book of Exodus.”* Griswold went on to quote a commentary on Exodus written in the 5th century by John Chrysostom, one of the early church mothers and fathers, who wrote, *“It’s not enough to leave Egypt, one must also enter the promised land. And to get there, one must travel through the wilderness.”*

And what a wilderness it’s been. Scholars tell us that the twin pandemics, along with the growing climate crisis, are likely to be the most consequential, the most formative, the defining events in the lifetime of today’s young adults. On this Easter Vigil, we’re emerging as a people from a world – wide wasteland, a battlefield strewn with the bodies of millions of our siblings in the Body of Christ, lost to COVID, to racism and white supremacy, to xenophobia and homophobia and sexism, to violence spawned by our addiction to conquest and to guns themselves, and to despair, especially among young people.

Our own country has seen unleashed a veritable orgy of hate speech, of intolerance, of polarization, of lies and alternative realities, encouraged at the highest levels of our political and religious institutions, making it impossible to know what’s true, and to work in common cause on the existential problems we face as a people.

Tragically, these are not just distant events we read about in the news. The cold hand of death has come much closer to home, and we mourn the loss of four beautiful, bright young adults on campus this semester alone.

Too often, it’s felt as if we’ve entered the valley of dry bones, and have little idea of the way out.

Bishop Barbara Harris, whose human presence we also lost this year, but whose spirit will forever inspire us, loved to remind us that, *“We are an Easter people, living in a Good Friday world,”* but these months have felt like a full year of Good Fridays. Some of my church friends have taken to renaming our liturgical calendar as a single endless season, referring to last Sunday as the 54th Sunday of Lent.

Yet, my beloveds, in the midst of it all, I have watched you love and support each other, through one loss and crisis after another. I've heard you dare to say, over and over, "I'm worrying about you, how can I help?" "I hear you, you're not alone." "I'm so sorry, that must be so hard," and simply, "I love you." I've heard these declarations of selfless love, more than I ever believed possible. Your hearts, and mine, have been cracked open this year, our consciousness has been raised, and I'm convinced you will never allow your hearts of flesh to turn to hearts of stone again.

Welcome to the resurrection. Lent is over. In spite of all we've shared in the wilderness, we've walked through Holy Week together, and now, together, we've arrived at Easter. Though our troubles persist, we are now in the promised land, and we beckon to those who are still not quite so sure, including ourselves, that hope is on the way.

Listen to the words of the Rev. Erika Takacs from her poem, *The Coming Alleluia*, describing the threshold we pass through this very night:

They say there will be no Easter this year, she writes.

No hats.

No hunts.

No hymning.

*No lilies to fill a bright room
with a fanfare of pollen.*

*No garden, no angel,
no victory.*

*They say that our journey
born in sackcloth and ashes
will lead us at last
to nowhere.*

*And so we sit worried
that the tomb, this year,
will be found, for once,
still full.*

*That Mary and the others
will leave with their spices
and come back home with nothing.
That this year the women will finally end their work –
anoint and then
leave empty.*

*Ssh. Be still.
Do you not hear her?*

*Clucking close by like an old mother hen,
brooding and sighing and
stretching her wings?*

*Fear not, she says,
for I did it before –
in the silence
in the dark
in a closed and locked room
in a world that had known
only death.*

*Did I not once prove
once for all
that there is nothing you can do,
no decision you can make
(for good or for ill)
that can stop
me
rising?*

The hope we signal tonight is more than a feel – good cliché. Mary Magdalene and the other women in today’s gospel did not come to the tomb seeking hope, but some kind of comfort, of slowly beginning a journey to closure for their overwhelming grief. They didn’t know the end of the story, a new birth of hope. And even though we do, embracing that hope, after being worn down by a year like this, is not easy. It’s not a simple decision, or even a sheer act of will. No, it’s born out of whatever foundation we have built of our faith, and it is what sustains us. And it’s nurtured and strengthened in loving relationships, in community. So let’s start rebuilding our tattered foundation of faith, together, using the amazing tools we’ve discovered in this season.

And faith starts by declaring that hope is not simply a means to feel better in difficult times. Hope, the ability to look out into a ravaged world and to see God’s hand, as the Sufi poet puts it, actively turning dung into flowers. Hope, then, is the essential tool of discipleship. Our Presiding Bishop’s Easter Message echoes this theme, “*In spite of the fact that these are hard times...*,” Bishop Curry says, “*Our work goes on. Our labor for love continues. We will not cease, and we will not give up until this world reflects less our nightmare, and more God’s dream where there’s plenty good room for all God’s children.*”

My dear friends, the tomb is empty. On this holy night, Jesus begins the final chapter of his ministry in our midst, his final round of teaching, and sets the stage for the most abundant gift of all – the indwelling Holy Spirit and the Christ, constant companions,

sources of wisdom and compassion, for our pilgrimage of love, together, as Easter people through this Good Friday world.

So maybe the real questions we should ask this Easter are, *“To whom will I turn to nurture my hope?”* and *“Who needs me to share my hope for their journey ahead?”*

As you move into our small groups, or reflect alone, let’s ponder these questions, *“Who will I turn to to nurture my hope?”* and *“Who needs me to share my hope for their journey ahead?”*

Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed, alleluia!