

***“Living Deeply Beyond Death”***  
***A homily by Ethan Jewett for the people of St. Nicholas***  
***11 April 2009***

***The Great Vigil of Easter***

*Genesis 1:1-2:4a + Genesis 7:1-5, 11-18, 8:6-18, 9:8-13 + Genesis 22:1-18*  
*Exodus 14:10-31; 15:20-21 + Isaiah 55:1-11 + Ezekiel 36:24-28 +*  
*Ezekiel 37:1-14 + Zephaniah 3:12-20 + Romans 6:3-11 + Mark 16:1-8*

“And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” So ends the Gospel reading for this Great Vigil of Easter. It is a sad way to greet the resurrection of Jesus, for fear keeps us wallowing in the death of the Cross, rather than transcending it to embrace the promise of eternal life. Isn’t this good news that calls for unrestrained rejoicing? And yet, the two Marys and Salome react to the news of Jesus’ resurrection not with excitement, not with hope, not with expectation, but with raw fear. So, what are they so afraid of?

The answer is complicated. To begin, the Resurrection threatens traditional Jewish beliefs about burial and the afterlife. Desecration of the family tomb, as documented in the Gospel narrative, endangers the repose of the crucified Jesus’ soul, because it separates him from the unified Jewish tribe of departed souls in the afterlife. According to Jewish scholar, Herbert C. Brichto, it is “not mere sentimental respect for the physical remains that is . . . the motivation for the practice, but rather an assumed connection between proper sepulture and the condition of happiness of the deceased in the afterlife.”

Historical experience and national identity are also important factors in the women’s fearful response to Jesus’ disappearance from the tomb. Jesus’ deliberate identification of his body with the temple in Jerusalem frames the empty tomb in a unique historical context. The violation of the tomb, then, cannot help but be compared to the sacking and desecration of the temple that inaugurates the exile of the Jewish nation from their homeland and the loss of integrated Jewish identity.

Ritual, in this case the ritual accompanying death, provides the structure by which Jewish identity is expressed and affirmed. The invasion of Jesus' tomb, therefore, picks at one of the greatest wounds of the Jewish collective psyche. Faced with a traumatized collective unconscious, the three women respond to the threat defensively, protecting the Jewish nation from further trauma through fearful silence.

Defense of this national complex is precisely what Jesus expects. The upsetting discovery of the empty tomb is a call for the Jewish people to heal from this trauma. Instead of silent, paralyzed living at the foot of the Cross, where the national brokenness is not named or cared for, Jesus demands that the people see that the death in which the Jewish nation has been living for centuries is an illusion and that everlasting life is within their reach. Just as he rises victorious by staring down death and surviving it, so too can Israel stare down its historical death and restore its identity as the beloved children of God. The Gospel reading is, in fact, the capstone of the salvation history we began in Genesis with the Creation story, culminating in the healing of the collective psyche, the reintegration of the national identity, and the resurrection of the Jewish people, recalled from exile and death by their Creator. In this act of healing, the loving covenant between God and the chosen people has been restored.

Culture, history, and national identity provide the scenic backdrop for the main event center stage, where baptism and resurrection intersect and explore the nature of God and the self. In our reading from Romans, Paul describes baptism as the great act of mimicry by which the individual testifies to his faith in the resurrected Jesus. Known as *mimesis* in ancient Greek philosophy, this mimicry is designed to reflect the ultimate reality or truth of an original act or form.

So, in baptism, the death of the baptized person's former self and the emergence of a reborn self is an act that declares the ultimate reality and truth of

the original act it imitates, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Baptism, then, is another death ritual through which the individual expresses identity, both in terms of the representation of the self and that self's belonging and kinship within a larger community of resurrected people. The rhetorical question from Romans, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" is merely an acknowledgement that, in baptism, we accept the death of our former selves. We accept transformation, so that God and the human being may be united.

Now, not everyone thinks transformation is such a great thing. Transformation is not just a tinkering around the edges, like raising a hem or mending a torn seam; it is radical change from the inside out, from the very womb of Resurrection. That is what it means to be reborn. No wonder, the two Marys and Salome were terrified by the Resurrection of Jesus. Shel Silverstein, illustrates the fear and vulnerability of the individual's dying-birthing process, in the following poem:

The hens they all cackle, the roosters all beg,  
But I will not hatch, I will not hatch.  
For I hear all the talk of pollution and war  
As the people all shout and the airplanes roar,  
So I'm staying in here where it's safe and it's warm,  
And I WILL NOT HATCH!

People who refuse to change, because they fear the loss of safety and comfort, will never be reborn in Christ. The vast, uncharted existence outside of our shells makes us feel small, powerless, vulnerable. It is a risky venture.

Risk is such a dirty four-lettered word. It smacks of irresponsibility, impetuosity, impulsivity. It's what we do when we don't think carefully through things, when we put our money into volatile investments or let our 15-year old children learn to drive in the new car. "How could you have been so stupid to take that kind of risk?" we say and shake our heads in disappointment or disapproval. But risk is exactly what Jesus is asking the two Marys and Salome—and us—to take: to risk being more than we are, to risk making the world better than it is, to risk perceiving the Resurrection on the other side of death.

It is fear that keeps us from living as resurrected people. In fear, we remain ungrowing, unchanging inside our shells, taking no risks, in a state of living death. Conquering this fear requires the Christian to risk the very essence of himself, what the theologian, Paul Tillich, calls the Courage to Be. It takes great courage to exist in the full knowledge of our own mortality and yet to be fully ourselves, in spite of it. Tillich claims, in part, that isolation and disconnectedness among human beings fuels this fear of death. Courage is simply the hope-filled person's word for risk. And hope is what the Resurrection is all about.

So, what should our response be to this disconnectedness, if we are to live with Resurrection courage and hope? In this me-oriented facebook world, a "friend" is increasingly someone we've ever met in person, every comfort and commodity is available on demand, and the faceless blogosphere has replaced the kitchen table, the church, and the watercooler as the locus of conversation and community. For all of our technological progress, this is shallow, dehumanized living, particularly for a Christian. I know this may seem a surprising critique coming from me of all people, but nonetheless, I ask you: Is that how we envision friendship? Is that the identity we want to express? Is that who we are as a community?

The author, Anaïs Nin, once suggested, “people living deeply have no fear of death.” I think she may be on to something. Perhaps that is what Tillich is talking about, and Shel Silverstein, and Paul, and Jesus. Living deeply means we cannot be beings in silent isolation, concerned and accountable for only our own welfare or happiness or needs. The way of Jesus, the way we’ve been following this Lent and Holy Week, is one that leads out of isolation and into committed relationship. Jesus’ disappearance from the tomb may break the old family bonds of identity in the afterlife, but it affirms a new collective identity based on mutual responsibility and hands-on investment in others. Christianity is a way of living—not just a system of belief—a way that requires us to imitate Jesus’ commitment to live deeply. Live deeply beyond just showing up for church on Sunday. Live deeply by nourishing your soul with prayer. Live deeply by committing your time and talents to this community. Live deeply by serving others in need. What are you so afraid of? Go ahead, live deeply.