

The Rev. T. Stewart Lucas
The Great Vigil of Easter
April 11, 2009
Matt 28:1-10

My Aunt Kay and Uncle Bill live in Nashville, Tennessee, and they are two of the funnest people you will ever meet. They are good Southern Christian folk but, well, let's just say they don't attend church every Sunday. My Aunt Kay has a tradition of sending greeting cards on just about every occasion possible, and this Easter card is the only one I've ever received that I could ever dream about sharing with in a sermon!

The front has a church and a line of people outside about to go in. It says:
Easter is a time we gather in church . . . (open card)
To see if they've done anything to the place since Christmas.

I Lori is now with us and we've moved the baptismal font, but not much else has changed. Or has it? Well, after Jesus was born we saw him grow up in the carpenter's shop and get lost in the temple. He started preaching and teaching and healing and crowds started forming. He couldn't do the work all by himself so he was downy ocean and saw 12 good fisherfolk and called them to be his disciples. They followed him everywhere he went, knuckleheads that they were from time to time. He tried to teach them about the love of God. Sometimes they got it and sometimes they didn't. Because Jesus loved to teach in stories and they weren't always great at analyzing them to say the least.

The authorities got a little wary of this Jesus guy who was claiming to be a king and they brought him to trial. A crowd rose up and told their leader to kill him. That leader didn't have a whole lot of guts and didn't want to have an angry mob after him, so he gave the order. Jesus ended up being killed on a cross outside of Jerusalem. Some folks did the right thing and wanted to honor him and so they wrapped his body up in some linen they had found and laid him in a tomb hewn out of rock.

Turns out a lot has changed since Christmas.

And now we've just heard that these faithful women are on their way back to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body and when they arrive they find that he is not there. He is risen!

This is the first Easter. Jesus Christ is risen from the dead and the young man says, "Come and see. Then go and tell."

These are the first Christians, and this is the first Easter. The women ran from the tomb to the disciples paralyzed by their fear and amazement. But, those first witnesses didn't just give their testimony in words. These are the people who eventually fanned out to preach the Gospel, to tell other cities and towns and nations about Jesus. They preached and taught others and eventually churches were formed. Those first witnesses brought people together to live as Christians. "To be a Christian witness is not simply to repeat what you have heard. To be a Christian witness is to give your whole life as evidence of the truth. Belief in the resurrected Lord can't be argued or explained to someone. Even Jesus didn't try that. He knew the truth had to be seen, had to be touched, had to be explained.

We are witnesses when we can invite someone to look into our homes, our families, our friendships, our work, to look into our checkbooks and daytimers—and find Jesus. We are witnesses when we allow ourselves to be touched by folks who are lost and afraid. We are witnesses when we live our lives showing compassion, patience, forgiveness and love.”ⁱ

And yet we are afraid. We are afraid to be compassionate because it could look like we are letting someone take advantage of us. We’re afraid to be patient because it would like we are weak. We’re afraid to love because that means being vulnerable with another person. In fact, we’re afraid to believe.

How do you think the women at Jesus’ tomb felt? Think they had the same moments of doubt? REALLY he’s not here? You want ME to go tell the disciples?

YES. Exactly. YOU. ME. WE are the witnesses to the resurrection.

Methodist preacher William Willimon says that “People like us are the sort of folk who like to believe that we can have the resurrection and still have the world as it was yesterday. We want to have Easter and still have our world UNROCKED by resurrection. We are amazingly well adjusted to the same old world.”ⁱⁱ

This is the point, tonight everything changes. Jesus is raised from the dead. Our world was rocked by Jesus’ birth at Christmas and now it is rocked once again by his resurrection. The world is not the same. As Christians, we see tonight that LIFE triumphs over death. We see HOPE take charge again. He was dead, now he lives. Light fills the empty tomb. We therefore must live in the world looking for the beauty, the grace, the potential and the possibilities. He is raised. We are different.

It’s hard...it’s hard to look for and to expect beauty and grace in the world. We all know what’s it’s like to watch the nightly news. But you see, no matter how big the destruction, the Resurrection comes. No matter how hopeless it seems, the Resurrection comes. No matter how dark it appears, the Resurrection comes. Jesus is raised and we are freed.

To be a Christian witness is not simply to repeat what we have heard. To be a Christian witness is to offer our whole lives as evidence of the truth. In a minute we will take the vow to continue to tell the story to Alexander James Fiedler. Now we have the responsibility to teach him by our word and example the Good News of God in Christ. We will do all in our power to uphold him in his life in Christ from his birth to his death to his Resurrection.

So come and rejoice. Be a part of the Good News of God in Christ. His Light has come. We are freed and so is he. He is not here. He is risen. Alleluia!

ⁱ Christian Century, April 13, 2003 by Kristen Grant. Adapted from this article.

ⁱⁱ William Willimon, 4/4/1999—Easter as an Earthquake.