

**The Rev. T. Stewart Lucas
St. Margaret's Church
The Great Vigil of Easter
April 3, 2010**

This is THE night - a night like no other. A night filled with mystery and remembrance. A night filled with images and music and an awareness of all our senses. A night filled with eager anticipation, hope, amazement, wonder and finally joy. It is a night when we get to retell the story of our very beginning, our liberation, our salvation and our ultimate freedom. Our story is a long one, just like tonight's service. The story starts before time, when the Spirit was hovering over the waters of chaos, of nothingness. God loved so much, that we were chosen to be children of God, members of the body of Christ.

The story is one of love, creation, and new life, and yet the story is permeated with images of impossible merciful things like the resurrection from the dead of a man who was condemned and crucified and whose body was securely buried in a tomb. As we focused our eyes on the flames of our candles, we heard the images of God's liberating power in the lives of God's people. Through those stories, our ancestors pass on to us their experiences. It is freeing in and of itself, again and again to sit together in the deepening night to listen, sing, and pray.

The Bible was written hundreds of years ago by people who may or may not have actually witnessed what happened. They may have heard it from someone else who had heard it from their grandfather who was only in the crowd when Jesus was on trial or when the angels were at the tomb.

It's like that game we all used to play in elementary school. Everyone sits in a circle and one person leans over to the other person and whispers a sentence about something into the other person's ear. They lean over and do the same thing until the story makes it around the circle. Finally the person at the end tells the story out loud and they compare the two different versions.

How do we know what the people in the Bible actually said?

Well, the obvious and yet disappointing answer is that we really don't know. Scholars will be arguing until Jesus actually comes back as to when the gospels were written and how many and what the lost scrolls actually say and who wrote them. Those gifted people are certainly doing great and valuable work, but what does it mean for us?

It means that we have been given the gift of faith for a reason. It means that we have to come here tonight to keep telling the story because tonight is like a family reunion for the children of God. On Easter Day my family used to gather in the country where my great grandparents lived. We'd eat a huge lunch, ham, sweet potatoes with marshmallows, pound cake, deviled eggs, incredibly sweet tea, and that ever present beautiful green jello mold with bits of cream cheese and fruit cocktail mysteriously suspended in it. After lunch we would sit on the screened porch in that old white painted glider. We'd listen to my great grandfather tell the stories of shootin' the man who was trying to steal the chickens out of the coop and the one about my dad cutting his toe off with the lawnmower. You know the stories. The ones about how some distant cousin of yours twice removed actually stole the family Bible. We'd plot how we could break into her house and steal it back. It was ours! Those are the stories we'd hear every year. They were never quite the same. They seemed to get better every year. Some new detail would arise that would change the story in some way.

We gather here tonight to keep sharing the story, our story. To keep witnessing to the truth we believe. Every year we hear the stories, and they never seem quite the same because we have been changed by the love of God in some way over the past year and the stories suddenly have new meaning in our liberated lives.

The stories we have heard this Easter Vigil serve “to assure [us] that the God we worship and for whom we wait to act in Jesus’ tomb is committed to life and salvation and that God will accordingly have the last word.”ⁱ This story is not coming to an end this night, but rather it is just beginning. This is the beginning of life, of an Easter life, of our Easter life.

And tonight what better way to recommit ourselves to truth, to Jesus, to the truth, to what we believe to be our history, than to renew our Baptismal Vows with Abbigail Diane, Paul Bannen, Dylan Patrick and Charles Christopher. Tonight we bury them in the water and they die with Christ. The water may seem scary, but then they are raised out of the waters to a new Easter life with Christ. We commit to remaining in community and witnessing the story to those who do not know it that God earnestly desires to give us life and salvation through Jesus Christ. We keep on teaching and learning and breaking bread together. We keep on messing up and trying to do better, repenting and then proclaiming. We strive to love each other and seek the best for our neighbors, all of our neighbors. And we beg of the Holy Spirit to give us the grace and strength to do all of these things.

Perhaps you need to struggle with the details of the Christian faith, but I can’t explain the Resurrection and the Easter story. Rather I believe that “Resurrection explains us.”ⁱⁱ Easter is not about the facts. Easter is about the power of God. God brought about creation in powerful unexplainable ways. God brought prisoners enslaved by sin into new life and a promised land. God made covenants and promised new life. God gives us that new life in Jesus, the Resurrected Jesus. God did it in ways that we cannot explain, but God did all of these things out of love for us. God continues to make a way where there seems to be no way.ⁱⁱⁱ

There is no way to explain it, but rather we are called to witness the love that we experience and lose track of time in spreading that love to those we encounter. We are liberated. We are no longer in the tomb. This Easter is our Easter too, if we chose to follow Christ. “He is not here – he is risen!”

“How do I know this? I don’t ‘know’ it exactly, the way I ‘know’ that the sun will come up tomorrow or that my daffodil bulbs will bloom. The Resurrection is not of that order of knowledge. It is a gift of faith.

“I know it because my grandparents told me 30 years ago and my parents told me about my baptism in these waters and because last year on Easter Day a preacher whom I trusted told me again. I trust these witnesses. That’s all we are, in the last analysis – witnesses. The Christian faith, in the last analysis, is built on trust in the witnesses. That’s what the preacher is today, and that’s all the preacher ever is – one who testifies to the truth. “He is not here; he is risen. And they went and told the eleven. Now come with the women and with Peter and look in the empty tomb. Then go home, amazed at what had happened because tomorrow you have to go and be a witness.”^{iv}

ⁱ McCurley, Foster R. *New Proclamation, Year C, 2003-2004*. Fortress Press: 2003. p. 243.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

^{iv} Rutledge, Fleming. *The Bible and the New York Times*. p. 137