

B Easter Vigil 3.30.24
John 20:1-18
Focus Statement: God shows up.

This is the night. That's what we chanted as we processed into the Luther Room and prepared to share the great stories of our faith. This is the night. That's what is written on the cake we will share in just a short time. This is the night.

This is the night, but, the night for what? Some of you may well remember our first Easter vigil attempt, back in 2015, where a very excited baker made me the most elaborate bunnies hiding Easter eggs cake of all time. Starting the tradition at Trinity that continues to this day of bunny cakes to celebrate the resurrection. Note the pre-referenced cake we will share in a bit. But tonight is about something much older than that. While tomorrow morning we gather in the early morning light to marvel at the empty tomb, tonight is about keeping watch in the darkness. About standing together as we wait for God's promised glory, strengthening each other with the stories of how God has come through in the past.

Some history for you, the Easter Vigil is one of the earliest liturgies of the Christian faith. All through Lent we have walked deeper into the darkness, a darkness which became complete last night, when from the cross Jesus breathed his last. Now we stand in the darkness of night, in the darkness of the tomb, waiting for the return of the light. We started tonight with the lighting of the new fire. In the same way that the lights of the Advent wreath grow week by week, as the arrival of the Christ child grows ever closer, this new fire sparks in us hope that the fire of faith that seems to have died on the cross was not fully extinguished but was just lying in wait to spark again. We shared the flame among us

as we processed inside, not extinguishing it, but letting it grow as we heard stories of the faithful. But before we switch to the stories, one more word about the flame. Which has both theological and practical applications. It's late spring in the northern hemisphere, fall in the southern. It's better than it could be, but it's not particularly warm tonight. You may have found yourself, intentionally or not, drawing closer to the fire as it caught, pulled forward into the warmth of Christ and the gathered community.

And then the stories. We told one another stories of God's great saving acts throughout history. Stories of times when people waited on God and God showed up as promised, to save God's people. The Easter vigil was the traditional time when new believers would enter the faith through baptism, and before their baptism, the older believers would share with the new all the stories of God's promise. These are the tales of how we know who God is and what God can do, through all God has done before. There are so many stories of God's faithfulness in scripture, but the stories chosen tonight all fall around the theme of keeping watch for God to act. At creation when God's voice moved over the waters. At the Red Sea, when God delivered God's people from slavery to freedom. In the words of the prophet Isaiah. And in the fourth figure walking with the faithful in the fiery furnace. There are as many as twelve stories that could be told tonight. We kept it to four, for practical reasons. But imagine what it must have felt like, long long ago, when those eager joiners of the faith, sat in nervous anticipation for all that Christ was about to do in their lives while their soon to be siblings in Christ regaled them with tales of all that God had done for the faithful in the past. What hope and fear must have filled their hearts. I hope hope and fear has filled yours tonight, hope for all that God will do in you, and fear for all

that God has shown God is capable of, for fear is a synonym of awe, and awe the only appropriate response for the one who is at the same time vast enough to speak creation into being and intimate enough that the psalmist assures us that even the individual hairs on our heads are numbered, are known, by God.

I hope hope and fear, awe, wonder have filled you this night. But if they haven't, that's ok too. If they haven't, you're in good company. Hope certainly hadn't filled Mary Magdalene, in the growing light of that morning so many years ago. She'd gone to the tomb not with hope, not with fear, but with resignation. To finish a job that I imagine filled her with honor, grief, and dread, to prepare the body of the one she'd believed to be her Lord and Savior for burial. When she came to the tomb and saw the stone rolled away and the tomb laid empty, she ran and told the others not of the miracle of the resurrection, but of the horror and violation of a grave robbing, "they have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Peter and another disciple engaged in a very disciple-like comedy of errors footrace, agreed that the tomb was, in fact, empty, and left. But Mary stayed. Stayed in her pain, stayed in her sadness. Stayed in the seeming violation and abandonment of the empty tomb. Mary stayed, and to her came the risen Lord. She didn't recognize him at first, thought he was the gardener, but even that wasn't enough to stop the Lord from showing up.

Dear people of God, this is the night where God's deep love for us is revealed in the one who called Mary's name, calls all of our names, until we recognize the one who is calling. What we witness in this vigil, what we've been witnessing through these last few days is that

whatever we do and whatever we are facing, God always shows up. This is the night where we see the full scope and scale of that promise. That ours is a God who will walk through death itself and back again, pulling us along into life. This is the night that is in the end not all that different from every other night, because every night, every day, every hour, every moment, the stories we've read, the prayers we've prayed, the fire we've lit, reminds us that ours is a God who is always with us. This is the night that we have our eyes opened to what is always true. That ours is a God who is always with us. Amen.