

The Great Vigil of Easter
 Rom 6.3-11; Mt 28.1-10
 22 March 2008
 Church of the Holy Communion
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We have sat around the fire together and told the great stories of our redemption, building up to the greatest of all stories -

And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone, and sat upon it. His appearance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. Lo, I have told you."

I love the little details that emerge in the different accounts that we have in the four Gospels of the Resurrection of our Lord – little details, by the way, that are the marks, the sure signs, we might even say the precious relics, of eyewitness testimony. We have here a couple of those precious relics unique to St. Matthew's Gospel. I love that these women, through Matthew, have preserved for us this detail that as they approached the tomb on that first Easter morning, expecting to anoint the dead body of their friend Jesus, the angel, the messenger from God, is sitting *on top of* the stone he had been charged with moving, and chose to do so by means of earthquake. That stone – that sign of the utter finality of death, that door through which all must pass but none emerge, that stone which seals the grave as the final commentary on the human condition – that commentary is so completely contradicted by God's love that the stone is reduced to a convenient resting place for one of the Lord's servants. God's love mocks death's power.

That's one relic. Another of these relics is the little personal addendum which the angel attaches to his message, which is, perhaps, an insight into the angelic personality. Having announced that the Crucified One has risen from the dead just as he said he would, having delivered the message, the angel adds, "*Lo, I have told you.*" I love that, because it's not an announcement for the sake of these astonished and bewildered women who are his graveside audience; rather, it's an announcement for himself, for his own benefit. It's as if he has been given a divinely commissioned "to do" list – a very limited, very specific set of errands – and now he has reached the end of it, and is checking off the last item. Job completed. "*Lo, I have told you.*"

Tonight we celebrate the Good News, the Evangel, the Gospel, which the angel announced from his seat atop the stone: That our last enemy, the enemy we submitted ourselves to by our own rebellion and sin, that enemy is destroyed. Death is dead. The serpent's head is crushed. Because, Alleluia, Christ is risen. And not just in some soul-affirming but body-denying Gnostic spiritualized sense. And not in some kind of "when we remember him and follow his teachings, it's almost as if he were still with us" sentimentalized sense. And tonight is not the liturgical recollection of some mass hallucinatory experience by a group of emotionally traumatized Palestinian peasants psychologized sense, as if such a thing were possible anyway. After all, if you put a dozen college students in a dorm room and feed them mushrooms, you'll get not one but a dozen different hallucinations.

No, the testimony that is borne to us, the Gospel the Church proclaims and upon which it is founded, is that when those holy women arrived to perform their grim task, the tomb was empty – empty because its Occupant was no longer dead but really, truly, gloriously alive and in fact had gone for a stroll in the garden. Our faith is that "on the third day he rose again." And that there is a great Day coming when all of us, who like young Beckham Patrick have in baptism "been united with Christ in a death like his, shall certainly be united with in a resurrection like his." That is our "sure and certain hope;" that is why "yea, even at the grave we make our song, Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia." We "believe in the resurrection of the body" because it has already happened – or, better, it has already

started. There is only one resurrection to life, and it has already begun – “because,” as St. Paul says, “in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”

Lo, I have told you, the angel said. And the good news the angel told, the resurrection of Jesus, is not a unique event. Another way of putting it would be to say that it is still happening – it’s still in process, going on. Jesus has become the firstfruits. That, obviously, is an agricultural metaphor. I grew up in Polk County, Florida in the middle of an orange grove. There was one tree in our yard that every year would ripen weeks before the others – but when the fruit on that tree ripened, it became the sign – the sure and certain sign – that the harvest of the whole grove was coming. That tree was the firstfruits.

When we were on the parish retreat at Kanuga a couple weeks ago, I picked up a brochure describing the various wildflowers one might expect to see when hiking in that area. And on the cover was a picture of the Acony Bell, a rare flowering plant that grows in the southern Appalachian mountains. The Acony Bell is a small and perhaps not especially impressive flower, but to folks who live in the Appalachians, it is special – and not just for its rarity, but also for its timing. The Acony Bell is the first mountain flower to bloom, often pushing its way up through a crust of snow. The Acony Bell is the sign of winter’s death and spring’s birth; it is the “firstfruits” of the mountain flowers. When you see the Acony Bell in the mountains, you know that snow and ice and cold are not the last word. In fact, when you see the Acony Bell, you know that Spring is already here; it’s already happening, even if it’s hard to see. There may be a good deal of cold and dark yet to endure, but Spring is there, and it is overcoming Winter.

One of my favorite singer-songwriters is Gillian Welch. She has a knack for writing brand new folk songs that sound like they’re a hundred years old. She wrote a song about the Acony Bell; it goes like this:

*Just a simple flower so small and plain
With a pearly hue and a little known name
But the yellow birds sing when they see it bloom
For they know that spring is coming soon*

*And so I’ll sing that yellow bird’s song
For the troubled times will soon be gone.*

Friends, the Acony Bell has bloomed. Earth’s long winter of sin and death is ended and the eternal Spring of life is a-borning, because, Alleluia, Christ is risen, the firstfruits of the dead.

Lo, I have told you.

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