

Matthew 28:1-10

The Great Vigil of Easter

April 4th 2026

The Rev. Wesley Steven Rowell

ALLELUIA CHRIST IS RISEN! (THE LORD IS RISEN INDEED!)

Ash Wednesday. Maundy Thursday. Good Friday. Lent. LPS. Waffle Shop. Let's take a breath. No really, take one. Because tonight, the Church exhales. We have been holding our breath. Through the darkness. Through the silence. Through the long, winding story of God's people. From creation to covenant to deliverance to exile to promise. We have stood in the dark. We have watched the fire. We have listened for a word.

And now something shifts. It is almost too much. Almost disorienting. This movement from darkness to light. From silence to song. From death to life.

And here is what I know tonight. Because of what Christ has done, we have nothing left to fear. Not even death. We began in the dark. And everything in us wants to believe that the dark is empty. That the dark is absence. That the dark is where God is not. But that is not the story we have been given.

New life starts in the dark. A seed in the ground. A child in the womb. Christ in the tomb. The darkness is not abandonment. The darkness is not the end. The darkness is not where God stops. The darkness is where God is already at work.

Which means that the places we fear the most are often the very places where God is closest. And the Church dares to say something even more astonishing tonight. We say that Christ did not stop at death. We say that Christ descended into hell.

The Anglican theologian William Stringfellow puts it like this: "He descended into Hell. That is very cheerful news indeed. There is nothing less than Hell unknown to him. There is nothing that I have known this side of hell that is unfamiliar to him. There is nothing known to me which I am wont to call Hell which he has not already known. Christ means, after all, simply that God is radically intimate with human history and experience in all its grandeur and diversity and personality. Christ has already lived my life. Christ has already died my death. Christ is risen from death for me."

In other words, there is nowhere you can go that Christ has not already been. No pit too deep. No shame too great. No grief too heavy. There is nothing in your life that is unfamiliar to him. Christ has already been there. And if Christ has gone there too, then there is far less to fear than we think.

I have seen this fearlessness. Not in theory, but at protests and rallies and marches, and in hospital rooms and emergency rooms. There is something almost unspeakably holy about walking into a hospital room. You never quite know what is waiting for you behind that door. And yet, in my experience, it is always holy. Christ is already there.

When I was serving in New Jersey, I visited a woman named Miss Barbara. She was the same age my momma was when my momma died. And when I walked into that room, she was so frail. So weak. The kind of weakness that quiets a room. But then we began communion. And I do not know how else to say this. Something in her woke up. Her voice grew stronger. Her eyes came alive. It was like life was returning to her in real time. She did not get up. She did not run. But everything in her came forward. Everything in her ran. And suddenly, we were not just sitting in a hospital room. We were moving. Running toward Jesus.

I think that is what it means when the women ran from the tomb. They ran. With fear and great joy. Not certainty. Not control. Not everything figured out. But something in them moved before they could explain it. Something in them knew that life was ahead of them. I know you know that feeling. When you do not have to convince yourself. When something in you just moves. When you stop holding back. When you move toward someone you love. When you finally let yourself be seen. When something in you says yes before your mind can catch up. It is not careful. It is not calculated. It is not held back.

It is alive. The early Church Father Irenaeus said, "The glory of God is a human being fully alive." And I think that is what resurrection is. Not just that Jesus is alive. But that we are being made alive in Christ. Fully alive. Awake. Open. Moving. Not shut down. Not guarded. Not bracing for impact. Alive enough to trust. Alive enough to love. Alive enough to move toward life again. And it feels like running, even if your feet never leave the ground. That is what I saw in that hospital room. Miss Barbara did not move from that bed. And yet everything in her came alive.

And somehow, that felt like the glory of God. And in just a few moments, you are going to do this. Maybe you will walk. But do not be surprised if something in you is running. You can see it every Sunday.

Watch the children when they come to this table. They do not hesitate. They do not calculate. They do not hold back. They come with open hands. They come with trust. Sometimes they run. That is not childish. That is resurrection. So tonight, we have nothing left to fear. Not the dark. Not the past. Not our wounds. Not even death. Because Christ has already gone there. Christ has already come all the way to you. So come to this table tonight. Not carefully. Not cautiously.

Come like someone who knows that love is waiting. Come like the women running from the tomb. Come like children running into open arms. Come running toward Jesus. Because Jesus, across time and space-through death and resurrection has already come all the way to you.

Alleluia. Christ is risen.