

Easter Vigil

March 26, 2016

Andrew Smeltz

## You Are Loved

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

You are Loved

For who you are

Exactly as you are

Unconditionally.

Tonight we hear the stories of God's life-giving acts. We hear the story of God's love for us. We hear the story of Creation when God makes a universe that is beautiful and full of life. God proclaims that what God has created is good, and God blesses us (Genesis 1:1-2:4). Then we tell again the story of the Exodus from Egypt, when God hears the people's cry and leads them from slavery and into freedom. We hear the words of the prophets and God's promise to remove our hearts of stone and to give us hearts of flesh, hearts that beat with God's love. (Ezekiel 36-37) We hear the story of God's greatest act of salvation. We hear of

Jesus Christ, God who is with us, God who died for us, raised from the dead so that we also might have new life. (Romans 6:3-11)

This is our story. We tell this story, because it reminds us that God is not distant. God is not some totally separate being who made the universe, set it into motion and then stepped away. Our stories remind us that God is with us and that God is working to bring life, mercy, and healing to us.

When Mary from Magdala, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and some other women went to the tomb, they expected to find Jesus' dead body, but when they found the tomb to be empty they were confused and disturbed. Then suddenly as if from nowhere, two messengers, radiating with God's power, appeared, breaking in upon the women's confusion and grief. Jesus' followers fell to the ground in fear, terrified in the presence of the divine. The messengers reminded them that Jesus said he would be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again. Then they **remembered**.

When Peter heard the women tell about their experience at the empty tomb. He **rose. He rose** and ran. He didn't walk. He ran to the tomb, because when he heard the good news from the women God raised his heart from the stupor of grief and death. When Peter found the tomb to be empty, when he found hope where death should have been, he was amazed, he marveled in awe at what God was doing.

You are Loved

For who you are

Exactly as you are

Unconditionally.

The women at the tomb and Peter have not yet seen the risen Christ. They believe based only upon the signs and upon what they are **told**. They are **told** that Jesus is risen. It is only later in Luke's gospel that they see Jesus after he has been raised from the dead. Yet they believe. When you stop to think about it, it is remarkable how similar that is to our situation. We are asked to believe, without having seen the risen Christ standing in the flesh before us. Jesus' followers saw him die on the cross, and they laid him in the tomb. We also have seen the reality of death and of lives wrecked by violence, suffering, addiction, and poverty. **They** saw the signs of the empty tomb and the discarded shroud. **We** also have seen signs of new life and of Jesus' resurrection: counseling programs for victims of grief or addiction, community meals that feed the hungry, and communities who pull together to raise money to pay for the healthcare of a child stricken with cancer. These are signs that Jesus is raised from the dead, that no death is final, and that life always triumphs. Jesus is present also in simple kinship, when we welcome the stranger and recognize Christ in the person with whom we are speaking. We may not see Jesus with our eyes, but we surely feel his living presence in our hearts.

After the women heard the good news they **remembered**. Not only did they remember that he would be raised, but they surely remembered his life. They remembered Jesus' message of unconditional love and acceptance for them and for each and every person. They remembered his teachings and his ministry. They remembered that he cared for people who were poor and on the margins. He healed the sick. He fed people who were hungry. He welcomed to community people who were cast aside and people who were hated. He said that **this** was what God's Kingdom was to **be** like, and he shared God's love with all of them. When they **remembered**, they told the good news to the rest of Jesus' followers.

We expect to find death, the end of something, that finality where there seems to be no hope of moving forward, but the tomb is empty. The shroud is discarded.

Jesus' love gives us hope. The empty tomb, which once seemed so threatening and to hold such power to end life, is a sign that no death is final. The shroud that has been discarded is stripped of its power and revealed to be a temporary distraction.

**With Christ, God brings us out of the tomb and into eternal life with God.**

You are Loved

For who you are

Exactly as you are

Unconditionally.

Therefore, should we not love one another? If God loves each and every person, without exception, then shouldn't we also love our neighbors and even our enemies?

Jesus died on the cross, because he loves us. God raised Jesus, who was fully human and fully God, thereby proclaiming that God loves us, God loves all people, unconditionally. In raising Jesus from the dead, God affirms humanity and all that God created.

There is nothing we need to do. There is nothing that we can do to earn God's love or to make God love us more than God already does. God will always love us with a love that is more vast and incomprehensible than the breadth of the stars and the galaxies in the night sky. In Jesus, God became human, lived, suffered, died, and is raised for no other reason than that God loves us.

You are Loved

For who you are

Exactly as you are

Unconditionally.

Amen.