

The Great Vigil of Easter
4 April 2026
Trinity, St. Louis
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Romans 6:3-11

Psalm 114

Matthew 28:1-10

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Tonight, we hear Matthew's story of the Resurrection, the story that we began on Palm Sunday. None of the Evangelists deals with twists and turns like Matthew, with his love of the exotic and dramatic. Matthew is the one who gives us the dreams of Joseph, the Magi, and Pilate's wife. Matthew also involves the created order in his narrative. There are stars, eclipses and not one, but two, earthquakes.

The first happened the moment Jesus died on the cross, when the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom, and the tombs were opened (27:51). The second earthquake occurs when Mary Magdelene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. This earthquake was caused by an angel coming to roll the stone away from the mouth of the sealed and well-guarded tomb.

Because we hear Matthew tonight, I want to think about what's been happening between these two earthquakes. Holy Saturday is the day on which we think of Christ descending into Hell to bring light and good news to the dead, as Peter says, 'preaching to the souls in prison' (1 Peter 3:19). It is often called The Harrowing of Hell.

The Orthodox tradition has given us the Gospel of Nicodemus, a long and complicated account of what that might have looked like. The story is told by Karinus and Leucius, two of the souls released from the tombs during the first earthquake.

Our two narrators describe dwelling in deep, shadowy darkness with all their forbears in faith. Suddenly, like the hero of a graphic novel, Jesus smashes through the iron-clad gates of hell. Then, stretching out his hand to Adam (and, one assumes, Eve as well, but I didn't write this account), Jesus says, "Come to me, all my saints who bear my image and my likeness. You that by the tree and the devil and death were condemned, behold now the devil and death condemned by the Tree!"

Down to this day, Orthodox Christians proclaim *Christ is risen from the dead, / Trampling down death by death, / And on those in the tombs / Bestowing life!*

Now, I tell you this story because our Easter destination is not the empty tomb. It's beyond the empty tomb. We are called to walk in newness of life. Easy to say. Hard to do. The

Gospel of Nicodemus tells us that Adam & Eve had lived in Hades for 5500 years. Can you imagine living anywhere for 5500 years?

What I want to know is this: how many of those in Hades didn't want to be yanked out, even by the hand of Christ? There must have been some. It may have been dark, but at least it was familiar.

What about the dark terrain of our own souls? The good news of this night is that there is no nook or cranny of sin or secret, in you, in me, or in anyone, that is beyond the light of Christ. We have only to open the gate and let him come down to our depths, let his Light reveal and name and heal all that we have hidden.

Here's a meditation by our go-to poet Malcolm Guite.

Through the Gate

Begin the song exactly where you are
For where you are contains where you have been
And holds the vision of your final sphere

And do not fear the memory of sin;
There is a light that heals, and, where it falls,
Transfigures and redeems the darkest stain

Into translucent colour. Loose the veils
And draw the curtains back, unbar the doors,
Of that dread threshold where your spirit fails,

The hopeless gate that holds in all the fears
That haunt your shadowed city, fling it wide
And open to the light that finds and fares

Through the dark pathways where you run and hide,
through all the alleys of your riddled heart,
As pierced and open as His wounded side.

Open the map to Him and make a start,
And down the dizzy spirals, through the dark
His light will go before you, let Him chart

And name and heal. Expose the hidden ache
To him, the stinging fires and smoke that blind
Your judgement, carry you away, the mirk

And muted gloom in which you cannot find
The love that you once thought worth dying for.
Call Him to all you cannot call to mind

He comes to harrow Hell and now to your
Well guarded fortress let His love descend.
The icy ego at your frozen core
Can hear His call at last. Will you respond?

Mary Magdalene and the “other Mary” come to keep watch at the tomb of their slaughtered friend, and their expectations are turned upside down. Jesus is not there, and they are not even permitted to sit and grieve at the empty tomb. Instead, they are told to get on the road, to *go quickly and tell the disciples* what they had seen.

And on their way, they run into Jesus (hooray!), and they grab onto his feet. This is what they’d wanted, but they can’t even have that moment for, before long, Jesus sends them on their way to tell the disciples to go to Galilee, where they will see him. That’s a lot of changes of direction in just a couple of verses.

God constantly calls us to turn from where we are, or where we want to stay, to go...somewhere else. Even when we long for rest, we are called out of our tombs and told to join the road trip to newness of life.

But we can’t walk in newness of life if we try to stay in one place; and if we trod the path with our heads down, and our hands jammed in our pockets, we will surely stumble and fall.

St. Paul tells us to *consider ourselves alive to God in Christ Jesus*. Just imagine! Alive to God. Alive to God’s world. Why seek the living among the dead? Christ is risen. Go quickly now. Get on the road and tell the world what you have seen.

*Christ is risen from the dead,
Trampling down death by death,
And on those in the tombs
Bestowing life!*

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

A blessed Easter to you all. Amen.