

Pastor Frank Espegren

Sermon for the Easter Vigil – April 11, 2020

John 20:1-18 – The Fever Has Broken

The Holy Gospel according to John. Glory to you O Lord.

¹Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ²So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” ¹⁶Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go

to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’ ”¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

The Gospel of our Lord. Praise to you O Christ.

Grace and peace to you from God our loving parent, and from the One who breaks through each and every one of our limitations, even death, Jesus Christ, our Savior & Lord. Amen. When illness strikes in my family, it is a well-known fact that I do not have the touch. Let’s just say that I do not have the best of all bedside manners - I’m more from a “Walk on it” sort of care-providing people. But fortunately, my spouse, Rhonda, does. And so it was always with the back of Rhonda’s hand on the foreheads of our two children growing up, and on mine even to this day, that we trust her caregiver’s proclamations – even the unwanted “You have a fever,” but also, the preferred, “No fever,” or if fever had in fact already taken hold, the words every person on Earth with a fever right now is wanting to hear, “Your fever has broken.” Don’t get me wrong, we own a thermometer, and we use it, but it always confirms what the back of Rhonda’s knowing maternal hand has already discerned.

Mary Magdalene is the first to reach the tomb on Sunday morning. She sets out after Jesus’ execution, hasty entombment, and for 24 hours thereafter, the Sabbath pause. This pause has only given the disciples and Jesus’ closest followers time to presume the situation’s obvious and ugly truth – that Jesus was not who they had thought. Because instead of being the invincible Lord and Savior they presumed, Jesus had died, an awful, humiliating and anticlimactic death.

Like the great stories of the Hebrew Scriptures we just heard this Vigil night, the tumultuous events of the past few days had led to the pivotal, climatic moment, but unlike those archetypal stories, divine intervention apparently had not come. As it did in the story of Abraham's testing, Abraham's hand raised before a bound Isaac only to be stayed by angelic intervention and a ram stuck by its horns in a thicket. Or the story of Moses' parting of the Red Sea just as the Egyptian army closed in. Or the whale spitting out Jonah, you know, apparently before the great fish's digestion could kick in - Jonah – such a bizarre and funny story. It's more of the same with Daniel's story of the fiery furnace, where God's divine intervention made sure Shadrack, Meshack and Abednego (Rack, Shack & Benny as the VeggieTales version nicknames them), did not incinerate.

The long silence of this day we call Holy Saturday seemed to confirm the worst – by all appearances, God had not intervened – did not break the blood-thirsty fever of the Friday, we in the tradition have ironically taken to calling “Good.” Good Friday means Jesus has died, and after the pause of Holy Saturday, now, early on Sunday morning, Mary has awakened to do what must be done – Mary's hope is so tiny as she sets out to tend Jesus' now very dead body. Mary does not think she is walking to the first Easter sunrise service; she believes the end of her morning journey is destined to be a sealed-up tomb.

This Holy Week preparation has been meaningful to me. With Covid-19 expected to peak in the coming week, it is not just waxing metaphorical to say the world has a fever. Fever, along with a dry cough, and breathing difficulties, are sure signs that Covid-19 has arrived. And at this Vigil of Easter, we pray for all who are feverish with Covid-19, for those who have caught the virus, their families, all on the front lines who combat Covid-19's spread, first-responders, health care professionals, and essential business workers, bravely making sacrifices

for our sake. The world is preoccupied with fever, and rightly so. There's even a smart thermometer app, Kinsa, that can in real time confirm whether the world's population's temperature is going up, or rather, as we hope (if our social distancing polices and practices reap their hoped-for return), going down.

But of course, fever is not limited to Covid-19. Not only are there other illness of every ilk, the metaphor is easily and appropriately stretched to include our feverish preoccupation with our own self-interest and selfish foci. This fever presents most frequently in preventing us from seeing our neighbor, especially those in need, or the bigger picture that if our neighbor is not OK, we aren't either. Our collective fever feeds our insatiable desire to use up the Earth's resources at an inequitable pace, limits our extension of God's love only to those who look and think like us, justifies our stranglehold on life. God's "thermometer app" (through the prophets and community organizers and activists and scientists and finally Jesus, the Living Word so sharp that it pierces bone from marrow), has been registering this fever throughout time, and despite human advancements in so many areas, confirms what we all deep down know already, we are burning up, if you'll allow the full extension of the metaphor. It is a fever unto death.

But here is the Good News - this night, this Vigil of Easter, has a most surprising result. Our feverish ways do not, cannot, destroy the divine One, who was born into our very existence to save us, from doing what He came to do. In our moment of feverish desperation, hear, as Mary Magdalene did, Jesus calling you by name; hear Jesus the Christ calling you from death into life. Just as a tepid bath is one of the recognized ways to calm a fever, God washes you over with baptismal waters – we are baptized not only into the death of Jesus, but also, thank God, into His resurrection! The Easter Vigil is a set aside in the church year to baptize, which we cannot do virtually, but the Vigil is also set aside to

remember and give thanks for our baptism – that we can most certainly do tonight! Thank you for holy and ordinary water washing and cleaning and soothing us all over. Easter means that the fever of our deepest denying and ailing and longing has broken. Jesus' hand is upon your brow. You are going to be OK.

One of my favorite Easter songs was made famous by the artist formerly known as Cat Stevens. You can sing along with it for it underlies our offering. For us, Morning has broken means our fever has broken. Christ comes in this new day, ushering in a new Kingdom blessed by divine values – all are welcome, all are made worthy through the sacrifice of Christ, all are called to recognize that the fever of selfish and self-centered life has been broken; that we are made whole and soothed and healed in baptismal waters and given the full opportunity to rise up from this life-changing water to a new start.

Life in the church, in the New Kingdom, in the Hope and the Way of Christ, lets us take and read our temperature daily, giving us hope in with and through the Holy Spirit, that our fever has broken. Morning has broken People of God, like the first morning! For Jesus is risen, Christ is risen indeed. Amen.