HOMILY EASTER VIGIL – YEAR A
"Living As Easter People"
(Romans 6:3-11; Mt 28:1-10)
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This holy night, this Easter Vigil, opens wide the very heart of our Christian faith. This is the night of nights, of story-telling, remembering, ritual and feasting. The goal of this night is to renew our heart-felt faith and to recommit ourselves to God in the risen Lord Jesus Christ. The primal elements of story, dark and light, water and oil, bread and wine are lavish this night and blend intimately so as to reveal our identity in Christ – we are a resurrection people, a people of hope, an Alleluia people!

The reading from Romans helps us understand the Old Testament readings and what has happened to the carpenter from Nazareth. The God who created out of nothing, who separated light from darkness, now banishes darkness forever. The God who prevented Abraham from killing his son Isaac on a wooden altar, now allows the death of his own son on a wooden cross. The God who led Israel from slavery to freedom, parting the waters for them, has now forged a path through death itself into new life through his own son Jesus Christ. God's declaration of loving faithfulness as spoken through the prophets is now forever sealed in the covenant with the risen Christ. Paul cannot stress this enough. "Do you not know?" he asks. Sin and death no longer have the last word on anything, for we are now free from the power of sin; dead to sin and alive in Christ Jesus.

Turning to the gospel, we hear the Good News of the resurrection from the perspective of Matthew. The first sentence – "the first day of the week was dawning" takes us back to the first reading from Genesis, and boldly proclaims that something even greater than the original act of creation is happening here – this is the new creation promised since the beginning of time.

The next sentence reminds us that God's mysterious plan continues to turn our human patterns upside down and backwards – it is the <u>women</u> who are the first witnesses to the resurrection, and the first evangelists to proclaim the Good News!

The earthquake announces that the old order is shaken to its foundations, and that a new world order has begun. The angel rolling back the stone and sitting on it announces that from now on, no power, not even death, can come between us and God's love. The appearance of the angel takes us back, though in a lesser degree, to the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain that was only an encouraging hint of his glory that would come through his faith-filled passing in Jerusalem.

The women are invited to go <u>into</u> the tomb to see where he lay. That is a reminder to us that we can now stop running away from our painful past. Twice we are told, once by the angel and then by Jesus himself, not to fear. God is now with us in all our doubt and darkness. We can now turn around, remember the past, feel the feelings, <u>go into our own</u>

tombs, and deal with the past as Jesus did – through the forgiveness of the Cross in the power of a Spirit-filled relationship with the Father.

Then we too, like the women, can be filled with great joy as we are sent out to the world to tell others that he is Risen and that all things are made new. And on the way, we too will meet the Risen Jesus who is always present in our lives, our Galilees, alive and active, working in the midst of the Church, the people of God, as they reach out to others to announce and live the Good News – we are forgiven and redeemed and all is new.

Baptism is at the heart of this Easter celebration, as we bless the Easter water, celebrate baptisms and renew our baptismal vows. Fr. Thomas Keating offers us an insight into the meaning of baptism on this most holy of nights. In Hebrew thought, the souls of the just after death were thought to descend through the waters of the Great Abyss to a place of rest called Sheol. As Jesus' soul descended through the waters of the Great Abyss, the sins of the world which he was bearing were completely destroyed. In the ceremony of baptism, we ritually descend into the waters of the Great Abyss together with Jesus, identifying with his holiness as he identified with our sinfulness. All our sins are destroyed in the waters of baptism. The one who emerges from the baptismal pool after being submerged in it joins Jesus in his ascent out of Sheol into the New Creation.

The resurrection of Jesus is not the resuscitation of a corpse, like Lazarus who had to die again, or the mere vindication of a just man. It is a totally new way of being. As Jesus' soul is reunited with his glorified body - baked, so to speak, in the limitless energy of the Spirit - he moves triumphantly into the heart of all creation.

The story of Peter McKenna illustrates the boundless newness of Easter. In 1945, Peter was in an anti-tank squadron in Germany during WW II. They were fired upon and a shell fragment hit the shell he was holding. It exploded in his face, leaving him blind, missing some fingers and needing plastic surgery to rebuild his face (nose, lips, eyelids, eyebrows and new facial tissue). During his two years in a veteran's hospital, he was cared for by Mary John, his nurse. Their relationship grew and in 1949 they were married. They had nine children, 16 grandchildren and four great grand children. But Peter, whose eyes were gone forever, has never seen his wife, children nor grandchildren. However, along the way, he learned to "see in the dark". He could not see his family with his physical eyes, but with the eyes of his soul he saw their loving presence. Peter would like to find the German soldier who shot him to thank him, because bringing Mary into his life was the best thing that ever happened to him. He even says that if he had to do it all over again, he would.

To keep vigil is a spiritual, mental and emotional workout. The readings, rituals, symbols and gestures are large this evening, engaging our senses to feast without restraint. This is the core of who we are, and we renew our spirit in the community of faith. God's salvation in Jesus Christ is our journey, our passage, our Paschal Passover; God's divine food in Christ's Body and Blood, the Eucharist – all combining to send us into the world for loving service in joy and peace, for the 50 days of Easter, and beyond.

In Jesus, the crucified and Risen One, our life has identity and meaning, value and integrity, direction and purpose. Along with those being baptized tonight around the world, we party in the water tonight, and we feast at the table of the Eucharist. The Word became flesh, so that our flesh could become God's word of love in our broken world.

Tonight, the night of all nights, we remember, we celebrate, we believe. Say it with me – "He is Risen! Alleluia!" "He is Risen! Alleluia!"