



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### **The Great Vigil of Easter (C)**

#### **Remember His Words**

**[RCL] Exodus 14:10-31; 15:20-21; Psalm 114; Romans 6:3-11; Luke 24:1-12**

The Great Vigil of Easter starts with death. Those who are keeping the first holy vigil in Christian history have had only one day to prepare for it; they have had no time to get used to the idea that their beloved is dying, as do those who watch a person weakened by illness. The Beloved whom they are mourning on Saturday night was young and vigorous and fully alive on Thursday. And those who are keeping vigil have not been taught about resurrection.

If we don't keep this reality in mind, we cannot enter into the misery and hopelessness of the first great vigil.

Vigil, in all religious traditions, means to watch, to wait, to observe—most often also to mourn. Those of us who have waited, wept, and prayed when a loved one was lying in bed struggling for the last breath know both the pain and the privilege of keeping watch as life leaves the beloved body. Our Christian faith teaches us that this is not the end, that even though the body is now empty, the person still lives; we still retain the awareness of the presence of the loved one.

On that first Saturday, however, on the Golgotha hill, those who are keeping vigil after the most terrible loss imaginable do not have a strong belief in resurrection. After Jesus was taken down from the cross and furtively wrapped in borrowed linen and placed in Joseph's unused tomb, those who had loved him were left without hope. The men who had lived with him during his public ministry, frightened and cowed, went into hiding. The vigil was left to the women, for this is what women did and continue to do. Those Jewish women who had loved him stayed with him while he struggled on the horrible cross, when his agony was so intense that it was unbearable to watch it—those women remained with him. The same women now stood near the tomb that hid him, waiting to offer him the rites prescribed by their tradition. The burial had been hasty; he deserved better than that. His body deserved washing and anointing with the finest oil and perfumes, to be wrapped by loving hands in clean linen.

What is strange is that they had scant hope of accomplishing their mission. They knew that the Romans would not let them get close to the tomb and that the priests' guard would be opposed to their approach. They had seen the huge stone covering the entrance to the cave, the finality of loss.

Yet, these women didn't say: "We can't do anything. Let's just stay with the men and see what happens. Maybe the danger will pass eventually." No. They kept their vigil. They came prepared with what was needed on such solemn occasions. Luke uses only the word "spices," but the custom was that they would wash the body, anoint it with oil, and use the spices before wrapping it in clean linen for the final burial. All this preparation for the vigil took place in the night and, unafraid of the darkness before dawn, they climbed again the dreaded hill of death.

Remember, they are women alone. Their men are in hiding. Even John, who stayed with him under the cross as he was dying, must have returned to the house, taking care of Jesus' mother as he had been commanded to do. So, this is the scene: The men are in hiding—the eleven who had been with him from the first moment he encountered Peter and Andrew fishing in the Sea of Galilee, to the terrible agony in the Garden of Gethsemane when they couldn't stay awake with him as he prayed. Since that night, they seem to have forgotten all that he has taught them.

The women who had become his followers, the women healed and redeemed by him with his love, refuse to abandon him. What are they thinking as they wait in the darkness of the bushes across from the burial place for the dawn to break? Their hearts are already broken; they have lost the one who gave them life, who gave them the water that never goes dry, the hope that never vanishes completely. So, with hope, they wait for the miracle that will allow them to perform the rites due their beloved dead. Do *they* remember any of his words?

This irrational hope is with them as dawn breaks, and they climb to the cave that serves as his tomb. They know they will recognize it because of the enormous stone that covers its entrance. Who will be kind enough to open it for them? Being practical is a trait of women. Their tasks during the days of their lives are so many, that they have learned to take care of physical needs and details since so many depend on them. So, their thinking this morning is focused on the detail of opening the tomb. They know how to do the rest.

A great surprise awaits them. The surprise of the ages. The tomb is open, and the body is gone!

Still, they don't remember any of his words. It takes two beings in brilliant white to remind them: "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Then they remembered his words...

Why do *we* look for the living among the dead? Life awaits us. Together with those two brilliant messengers who came to the women, St. Paul comes to us, in our vigil, to assure us: "We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him." Thanks be to God.

***Katerina Katsarkea Whitley*** lives and writes in Boone, N.C. She leads writing workshops and leads retreats on *Poetry of Faith, on Lent and Advent*. She is the author of eight books on biblical stories and faith.