



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

### **Keeping a Sacred Vigil**

**RCL: Exodus 14:10-31; 15:20-21; Psalm 114; Romans 6:3-11; Mark 16:1-8**

Throughout countless centuries, human beings have kept vigil for those they have lost or for causes that demand their awe and respect. From the deepest and most ancient memories of the human race come traditions related to death and dying and rituals that denote an effort to understand the greatest mystery of all—death. Each culture has its own rituals of respecting the dead, and most have observed a form of keeping vigil. Yet, as the details of our lives get more and more automated, so do our rituals become more abbreviated, and the solemn practices of honoring the body of the dead gradually disappear.

The frightful year of the pandemic has presented a new kind of vigil to hundreds of thousands of mourners around the world. The sacred ritual of keeping watch over a loved one as he or she lies dying has been snatched from mothers, fathers, children, siblings, and friends by the cruel fact of contagion. Relatives have not been allowed to enter the hospitals, to hold the hands of their loved one. That task has fallen, again and again, to overwhelmed doctors and nurses. The vigil of love has become a vigil of distance and of fear. In a similar manner, those who had loved Jesus during his lifetime and ministry could not keep vigil with him because of the danger of imprisonment or death in the hands of hostile priests and their followers.

The Hebrews of the first century observed age-old rituals of burial. The family, most often the women, washed the body and rubbed it with olive oil. Afterwards, they used all the spices and perfumes they could afford to anoint it. The body had to be buried before nightfall on the same day of death.

After Jesus' horrific death on the cross, his body was broken and bleeding. It took great care to lower it from the cross and wrap it quickly in cloths—usually strips that wound around the body with a separate long cloth for the head. Because Joseph of Arimathea had approached Pilate with a request for the body of Jesus, Pilate, probably by that time feeling guilty in addition to being greatly irritated by the day's rushed proceedings, acquiesced. Thus, the body of Jesus was spared the ignominy of a common grave. Joseph was a rich man, so perhaps with help from a couple of servants, he carried the body to a prepared tomb, his own, newly purchased. It had to be done quickly because the Sabbath was approaching. So the body was left wrapped but in its frightful state from the cruelty of the cross. And then a huge stone was rolled to cover the entrance to the tomb.

All this happened before dark on Friday. A curtain now falls on the story, and we know nothing of what occurred during that sad night and the Sabbath that followed.

We can make some guesses because of our common humanity. Mary, the mother of Jesus, exhausted physically and emotionally from seeing her son tortured and dying on the cross has been led away by John, who promises to care for her as his own. Her agony is known only to herself. Only those who have lost a child can understand her unbearable sorrow that night and have kept vigil with her through the centuries.

The other women who had stayed with Jesus to the end, watching at the foot of the cross, keeping their own agonizing vigil, were Mary Magdalene, Mary Cleophas who was mother to two sons named James and Joseph, Salome, the mother of James and John, the Zebedees, and Joanna, whose husband was Herod's scribe. None of the men are present. Peter, distraught after his betrayal, is hiding somewhere in the city; John is with Jesus' mother, but the other nine disciples have dispersed, probably to Bethany, on their way to Galilee. So only seven disciples remain in Jerusalem—five of them women. Of those, only three are able to carry on the rituals of death. This is Mark's testimony. One is a young woman, Mary Magdalene, and two are older, mothers of grown men.

It is the first day of the week, so they leave their beds as early as possible, gather the bundle with the necessary cloths, water, oil, and spices and, heavy-hearted, trudge to the place marked as a wound in their memories, the tomb where Joseph had buried the Lord of Life. They make that painful walk in faith, because they have no idea how they can get to the body of the beloved master and friend, a body hidden behind a great stone. Light is now breaking, and they can see their way, but still, they have no idea that anyone will be there to help them. Are they afraid of the dark, of being women alone, of those who murdered their beloved?

They must have been, but their love is greater than fear.

Now the light of the sun is making everything visible. And the worry about the heavy stone covering the entrance no longer matters. The stone has been moved. The tomb gapes empty. Mystified, they approach the entrance and bend to look inside. There is no body lying on the cold stone table. In the darkness, something white moves on their right and they are now terrified.

No wonder! Terror grips all of us—even those who claim not to believe—in the presence of the numinous. Three women have come in faith to perform a ritual of love and devotion. Now they are confronted by the unknown in a dark place of burial. The first words of the youth in white are strangely familiar: "Do not be alarmed." The Greek word used here denotes awe, wonder, and terror combined. It's not an ordinary word; this is not an ordinary experience. The women are already backing out of the cave, and they almost miss hearing the rest. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, the crucified. He has risen; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."

They run back to their temporary home still terrified, unable to speak. And the tomb is never mentioned again. The disciples know that Jesus is *not* in the tomb. Mark's report ends here. Something happened to the end of his manuscript. But the story did not end. It continues to this day. Soon, Easter Sunday will be upon them and upon us.

*Katerina Katsarka Whitley lives and writes in Boone, N.C. Her most recent book is a memoir, Myth and Memory, my Childhood in WWII Greece. She is available for retreats and speaking engagements, praying that one day we can all get together again as a community of faith—face to face.*