

Tonight, we entered this holy space in near darkness, punctured by the soft glow of the Paschal candle. The flame that draws our focus to the new light of Christ, as we hear salvation stories read and sung: God delivering his people, time and again, from oppression, darkness, and death.

Recall the words from Exodus: ‘Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today...”’

From Zephaniah: “Do not fear, O Zion... The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love...”

Paul, persecuted and afflicted throughout his time following Christ, writes confidently to the Romans: “We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.” “...just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”

And from Matthew: ‘But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised. Then Jesus [said], “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”’

“Do not be afraid.” A sentiment we’ve likely heard from loved ones trying to comfort and encourage us in the difficult times and seasons of our lives.

When is the last time you heard those words—and listened?

It can be hard to linger in dark times, to endure suffering and yet believe, as Moses assured the Israelites, “The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.” We arrive here this Easter Eve oh-so ready to experience *joy*. But before the heady scent of lilies hit us and the trumpet blast announces our risen Lord, we experience darkness.

Like the two Mary’s in the Gospel, with trepidation, we approach the yawning mouth of the tomb—our hearts broken by the chaos and cruelty of the world. Earthquakes shake and lightning flashes, but still, we cling to hope. What must the women have been thinking, as beside them, the terrified guards “shook and became like dead men”? For these women too must have been gripped by fear, having come from the foot of the cross, where they witnessed their beloved Lord experience the most agonizing death.

Yet, the two Marys do not allow fear to prevail. When the ground trembled and the fire bolts blazed around them, perhaps they clutched hands, saying to each other, “Can it really be true?” “What do we do?” And ultimately, together, they decide *to believe*, and go forth to spread the Good News of the risen Jesus.

As we peer into the darkened tomb, we too encounter something that rocks us to our core. Something we can scarcely dare believe. Jesus is not there. He has been raised from the dead. And like the Marys, we experience both “fear and great joy.”

“Do not be afraid.” Words we desperately need to not only hear, but to believe. In our sorrow and distress, we need to believe that God moves and works and creates new life, both in light and in darkness.

In darkness, we sit with loved ones in pain, able to offer nothing but our presence. In darkness, we cry out in grief for those we have lost. In darkness, we battle our addictions and tendencies toward sin—and the demons that try to convince us we are not worthy of love.

But in darkness, we also find rest and respite. Beneath the surface, the soil teems with rich nutrients—ripe for growth and rebirth. In the cavernous shadows, we blindly stretch out our arms to receive God's all-encompassing embrace.

In darkness, God works miracles. Just as the Israelites find themselves separated from their oppressors by a pillar of cloud until they can escape at morning's light. Just as two women discover the impossibility of an empty grave, igniting a 2,000-year-old movement that has brought salvation to billions, from all cultures and nations and races.

And from darkness tonight, we captured flickers of light from the Paschal candle. We turned our gaze toward the baptismal font. We heard the splash of water, imagined its cool trickle down our skin, the chrism on our foreheads, the trace of the cross. In unison we recited our covenant, together born anew.

In the remembrance of our own baptisms, in the tiny face of the newest member of the Body of Christ, we believe. We believe when God tells us, "Do not be afraid."

When devastation falls upon us, when the world asks, "Where is God in all this?", we know. Even in the spaces where he may seem farthest away, we see God present—planting new possibilities, sowing seeds of hope, forging paths to peace—working in us and through us, and inviting all to walk in the light of salvation.

The statement “Do not be afraid” does not stand to assure us nothing will go wrong—or that everything will turn out as it should. We know that’s just not reality. But it does assure us that whatever happens, God holds the power to raise us from the depths of our despair, that no trials we encounter are stronger than God’s love, and that in the end, God gets the last word—love reigns victorious.

“Do not be afraid.” “We know...” We know that across the ages, to the present day and beyond, God delivers his people out of darkness, creating new life.

At the threshold of a vacant tomb, in the gray haze of a breaking day, what might have been the end of the story was just the prologue.

We gather in this sanctuary tonight, no longer seeking the crucified Jesus, but discovering our risen Lord. On this holy night, we can walk into the light of Easter’s hope—hope fixed in the knowledge that no matter how deep the pit, how turbulent the waves, how terrifying the darkness, God is always present with us: parting seas, rolling stones from sealed caves, resurrecting and renewing.

In this hope we can decide not to be crippled by fear, but to choose certainty and knowledge, and go forth boldly and confidently to share the Good News. Alleluia. Christ is Risen. The Lord is Risen indeed. Alleluia.