

Easter Vigil

Homily of April 20, 2003

by Fr. Gerry Murphy

Three lowly and unsuspecting Jewish women - their reasonable concern over the removal of a large stone - an angelic stranger in an empty tomb - his startling and compelling message. What do these singular details from Mark's resurrection account of Jesus tell us about the God, we as a Christian people, profess to believe in? Well, I suggest that they reveal to us four key characteristics of our God: our God is a God of Freedom; our God is a God of Surprises; our God is a God of Life, and our God is a God of Revelation. So, let's consider the first of these, a God of freedom.

Isn't it interesting that the first to learn of Jesus' resurrection are not men, the ones whom the Jewish culture regards as the leaders of the community. Instead it was three women who first stumbled on this wonder, women who were regarded as second-class citizens, who did not share the same privileges and rights as men. As always the ways of God confound us. Jesus' whole life and teaching centered on humble service. He always insisted that his power was not of this world. Now after his resurrection, he drives home the same point: "My vision and dream of humanity are not determined by the natural order and understanding of things. In my vision the first shall be last and the last shall be first." The way of Christ is the way of humility. That women were the first to discover the risen Christ is certain proof of that.

And so the God of Jesus Christ, and the God we as a Christian people believe in, is a God of Freedom; a God who refuses to be held captive by patriarchy, hierarchy and human convention. And what might this God of Freedom's message be to our church, our world, and us on this Easter night? I dare to suggest that it might be this: "Let my people go. Unshackle them. Let my spirit breathe and my imagination dance in your hearts, in your families, in your church, in your world and in all of my beautiful creation."

And so to the second of our reflections on God: a God of Surprises. And as they approached the tomb the women were saying to one another: "Who will roll back the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back. Our three lowly and unsuspecting women were not prepared for that; it was a disturbing and curious surprise.

At times the burdens, tragedies, sufferings and losses in our lives leave us bewildered or even disillusioned. In the face of mindless war, appalling poverty and natural disasters, we are sometimes driven to utter despair and indifference. But what does our God of Surprises say to us tonight? I think our God of Surprises is saying this: "The spirit of the one who is risen - my spirit - is always in you; my spirit is never absent from your

life. Let this truth keep you wakeful and I will reveal to you the secret of a freshness that is always new."

And so to our God of Life. The young man clothed in a white robe said to them: "Do not be amazed! You seek Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified. He has been raised; he is not here." But what does that mean, we might well ask. Was Jesus' lifeless body somehow resuscitated so that he simply came back to life? I don't believe so. Jesus was resurrected or transformed in such a way that he was given a deeper and richer form of life. He was given new life and new spirit having passed through his suffering and death. The violence, hatred and fear that nailed Jesus to the cross did not have the last word. Jesus rose victorious and triumphant. The Christian way of life is always about this cycle of death and rebirth - losing or shedding one way of life so as to receive new life and new spirit.

So, if our God of Life were to have a message for us tonight, perhaps it might be this: "Name what has died or needs to die in you; claim your rebirth; grieve what you have lost, do not cling to it, let it ascend and give you its blessing, and then receive the newness and fullness of life I call you to each day."

And finally, let's reflect on the God of Revelation. And the young man said to them: "Go and tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you.'" And so our three Jewish women, in that moment, were called or commissioned to go forth and tell the story of what they had just witnessed. Why? Because our God of Revelation wishes to reveal Godself to a world and a people thirsting for peace, healing and reconciliation.

In a few moments **Shani, Janice, Mike, Marie, Sarah, Tom, Brian, Skip, Michael, Cynthia, Kristina and Linda** will be received into our worshipping community through the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and eucharist. What might our God of Revelation's message be to them on this joyful occasion? I suggest it might be this: "My beloved friends you did not choose me. No, I chose you and I am now commissioning you to go forth and bear much fruit in my name and in the power of my risen spirit. Know that I love you deeply and truly. I will always go before you and I will shepherd you all the days of your life."