

Heaven & Earth are Joined

Romans 6:3-11

The Great Vigil of Easter - March 26, 2016

The Rev. Dr. Ritva H. Williams



[SLIDE 9] This is the holiest night of the church year, commemorating the mysterious moment when Christ broke the chains of death. By the time the sun came up on the first Easter morning, the tomb was empty. To paraphrase a point made by Barbara Brown Taylor: Although the Christian tradition talks about “witnesses to the resurrection,” there were no witnesses. Everyone who saw Jesus alive again saw him **after** the resurrection. Whatever happened to Jesus between Friday night and Easter morning happened in the darkness of the tomb,

with the smell of damp stone and dug earth in the air. It happened where no one but Jesus could talk about it, and as far as we know he did not talk about it.¹

When the earliest followers of Jesus talked about this night, they didn’t try to explain the mechanics of the resurrection, but rather talked about its meaning **for us**. The Apostle Paul reminds us that through baptism we have been united with Christ in death so that we might be raised to walk in the newness of life (Romans 6:4). United with Christ, we are liberated from enslavement to sin — both those sins we commit and those sins that have been committed against us — so that we may live with Christ in God (Romans 6:6-9). Christ became one of us, walking with us in brokenness and sin, into death and the grave, into the absolute forsakenness of hell, in order to walk us out the other side into a new life in which we can participate in the wholeness and holiness of God.

The early church fathers expressed it with the slogan that Christ became human so that we might become divine. So the ancient Easter vigil liturgy boldly proclaims: This is the night in which the darkness of sin has been purged away ... This is the night in which all who believe in Christ are rescued from evil and the gloom of sin, are renewed in grace, and are restored to holiness ... This is the night in which, breaking the chains of death, Christ arises from hell in triumph ... The holiness of this night puts to flight the deeds of wickedness; washes away sin; restores innocence to the fallen, and joy to those who mourn; casts out hate; brings peace; and humbles earthly pride ... This is the night in which heaven and earth are joined — things human and things divine.

This is the night in which heaven and earth are joined — things humans and things divine. This reality is expressed beautifully in this painting of the Risen Christ sending the disciples out to

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, “Learning to Wait in the Dark” available at www.huffingtonpost.com/barbara-brown-taylor/learning-to-wait-in-the-dark_b_5175191.html.

fish. The painter John Reilly asserts that his goal is “to express in visible form the oneness and unity of [the spiritual] power, binding all things into one whole.” In this painting it is the shape of fish — which is ancient symbol for Christ — that joins not only the figures of Christ and the disciples but fills the waters and even the air around them. Christ not only joins heaven and earth, but fills heaven and earth, and all things human and divine.²

Richard Rohr describes the Risen Christ as “the standing icon of humanity in its final and full destiny.” The Risen Christ is “the pledge and guarantee of what God will do with all of our crucifixions.” The Crucified and Risen Christ shows us that “our hurts now become the home for our greatest hopes.”³ The death and resurrection of Jesus is not about leaving the earthly human sphere behind for a better place in some spiritual realm. The Risen Christ reveals “the goal, the fullness, and the purpose of humanity itself, which is ‘that we are able to share in the divine nature’ (2 Peter 1:4), even in this wounded and wounding world.” Even as the resurrection says something about Jesus, it says a lot about us.⁴ Rohr writes:

The risen Jesus is not being rewarded for a job well done as much as he is mirroring the full completed journey and goal. He is the “pioneer and perfecter” of the entire journey, as Hebrews (12:2) poetically puts it. He comes out the other side [of death and hell] shouting, as it were, “See it is true, love is indeed stronger than death! If you ever doubt it, just look at me.” [The Risen Christ] is the “guarantee” (7:22), the “pledge and promise” (Ephesians 1:14), *that love works*.⁵

The good news of Easter may be summed up in two statements. (1) Love wins. (2) Heaven and earth are joined together in the risen Christ and in every person and situation, in every time and place where love wins.

² This image was downloaded from joemckennawk.wordpress.com.

³ Richard Rohr, *Immortal Diamond - The Search for Our True Self*, Jossey-Bass: 2013, p. 84.

⁴ Ibid, p. 85

⁵ Ibid, pp. 146-7.