

Easter Vigil Year C: 20 April 2019  
St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY  
The Reverend Gary Cyr

**“This night, we recall Jesus’ giving of himself, his willingness to enter the darkness of death, and the power of Love to transform pain and suffering into abundant life.”**

Genesis 1: 1-2: 4a

Genesis 7: 1-5, 11-18, 8: 6-18, 9: 8-13

Exodus 14: 10-31, 15: 20-21

Ezekiel 37: 1-14

Romans 6: 3-11

Luke 24: 1-12

*“One ring to rule them all, one ring to find them, one ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them.”*

Classic words from J.R.R. Tolkien’s beloved trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*. Words that, for me, capture the fullness 20<sup>th</sup> and even 21<sup>st</sup> century ideals and ideology. When he wrote his classic, Tolkien did so having served in World War I and living through World War II. He was, I believe, greatly in touch with the reality that befell Western civilization and sought a way to give voice to the cruelty of humanity when people lust for power. This all-powerful ring is then the epitome, the ultimate symbol of humanity’s drive to rule, dominate, and subjugate. A seemingly indomitable power that seeks to enslave others so as to reward its master with untold control.

In many ways, Tolkien’s work is a critique of Western society’s industrialization; how the “old” world is being consumed by the new world of mechanization. This ring of power, forged in the fire of hell its self, symbolizes the displacement of goodness with the evil of self-interest coupled with contempt towards those deemed of little significance. Hobbits and humans alike were seen as diminutive in Tolkien’s imaginative world, mere puppets for an overlord who’s will was unquestioned. That is the nature of unbridled power. And anything

that challenges power's unfettered reign must be vanquished. One might risk the argument that Tolkien's work has more than a tinge of biblical truth embedded in it.

An unlikely Christ figure, we have Frodo Baggins the hobbit – just imagine that for a moment. Now imagine his cherished friend Samwise as John the beloved disciple. One supports the other in a quest to destroy this ring of power in the very bowls from which it was crafted. They travel into death itself to achieve their goal of liberating creation from the darkness of sin and thus restore hope to a world aching to see the light.

I cannot imagine Tolkien ever believing his work would be used to parlay a Christian message. I'm surprised by it myself. God has been at work in the world steadfastly and faithfully desiring a restored relationship with all that God has created. Jesus is the fullness of that desire Incarnated and the only one who could bear death, go to hell itself, and transform the desolation of sin into new life – a resurrected life. Jesus liberates us from bondage to a world that promises fulfillment while enslaving many in subjugation. Western civilization has been the root cause of so much injustice that only Jesus can truly free us from the harm we do to one another and creation. Only Jesus can descend into death to conquer it, ushering in life, new life in him.

We ritually embody that very message this tonight. We entered into a darkened church, symbolic of the tomb, unsure if we can find our place or even read our bulletin. We are dis comforted, albeit, for a brief moment. But dis comforted nonetheless, and we want to change that by returning to the familiar: we want to see. It is only light that can dispel the darkness. It is only the light of Christ that can enter our midst and pushback despair; to help us see with new eyes. It is only Christ who brings hope – a hope for all; most especially the poor, the homeless, the hungry, the prisoner, the marginalized, the disenfranchised. Hope to the displaced, the foreigner, the immigrant. All those who suffer under the ideology of supremacy. Jesus alone offers living waters to those who thirst for righteousness and justice. Tonight, we celebrate Jesus' triumph over the power of sin and death and all that perverts or prevents us from experiencing the love of God.

In the film adaptation of Tolkien's work, there is a scene where Frodo experiences his Gethsemane. In the ruined city of Osgiliath, the former capital of Gondor, which lies in the

shadow of Minas Tirith, the new capital and before the land of Mordor where evil dwells and plots to conquer and subjugate the world, Frodo – this Christ-like figure – is exhausted by the journey and seemingly unable or unwilling to continue onwards knowing he faces certain death. He simply says to his beloved companion: “I can’t do this, Sam.” He feels he cannot bear the trials anymore, that all is lost, and hope is fading.

Samwise – filled with the Holy Spirit as only the beloved disciple could be – replies: “I know. It’s all wrong. By rights we shouldn’t even be here. But we are. It’s like in the great stories...the ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger they were, and sometimes you didn’t want to know the end. Because how could the end be happy. How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad happened. But in the end, it’s only a passing thing, this shadow. Even darkness must pass. A new day will come. And when the sun shines it will shine out the clearer. Those were the stories that stayed with you. That meant something. Even if you were too small to understand why. But I think...I do understand why. I know now. Folk in those stories had lots of chances of turning back only they didn’t. Because they were holding on to something...that there’s some good in this world...and it’s worth fighting for.”

And scripture, for me, is one of these great stories; possibly the greatest story. For it testifies to a truth: that there **is** good in this world we have sullied, and Christ has redeemed it – he has redeemed it through the blood of the cross and the resurrection at the tomb. Episcopal priest, Matthew Fox names this goodness as *original blessing*. God’s grace has blessed the world with goodness; worldliness has tarnished that gift. Only Christ Jesus, through his selfless act upon the cross and willingness to endure humanity’s cruelty, does he transform ugliness into beauty, transgression into forgiveness, hatred into love. This night, we recall Jesus’ giving of himself, his willingness to enter the darkness of death, and the power of Love to transform pain and suffering into abundant life. The chains of subjugation and the willfulness of humanity are surrendered at the cross and transformed in the resurrection. No longer are we bound to sin and death, for we arise from the tomb of our sinfulness forgiven and restored, free to be the people God has created us to be: a people of original blessing. I believe Tolkien knew this truth

and captured it in his writing. It is a truth we bear witness to this night. Thus, let us rejoice –  
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!