

Homily for the Great Vigil of Easter, Saturday, April 11, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year A: Romans 6:3–11; Psalm 114; Matthew 28:1–10

My mother survived a car accident in which my stepfather Bill was killed on Valentine's Day in 2007. She had Alzheimer's disease. After being hospitalized for her serious injuries, she was in a memory care home near my sister and her family in Fairfax, Virginia, for the rest of her life. She would die there just over six years later.

I visited her regularly, almost every month, through those years. I always held her hand; I wanted to remember her touch. I always took pictures of her, of us. The visits were never really easy, but I have never regretted making any of them.

I knew that it was very unlikely that I would be with her when she died. It turns out that I had been with her ten days earlier. My brother and his family were with there the weekend before her death. She was able to hold her newborn, youngest granddaughter, for the first only time. She died a few days later, early in the morning, a little before dawn.

I remember that one of the things that I wanted to know was whether she died in her sleep alone or

whether someone sitting with her. I learned that she had had difficulty breathing that night, and because of that someone was with her. I got to speak to the staff member who sat in the place my siblings and I, in another time and place, would have sat.

I kissed my mother one last time as she lay in her coffin. We threw dirt on that coffin after it was lowered at the grave. I'll always be thankful for the pastoral care Trinity Church, St. Mary's City, Maryland, gave to our family. A good, Episcopal parish.

I begin with this memory tonight because we gather to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord when an epidemic is separating the sick and many of the dying from those who know them, love them, and want to be with them. That care, out of medical necessity, is handed over to others—an extraordinary group of medical professionals and large numbers of people whose jobs make their work possible.

People are not only alone in their sickness but in their deaths. There are amazing stories emerging now of caregivers doing things to help connect their patients with their family and friends. But I'm sure all of us would wish for it to be different, easier.

The question “Why?” often comes to mind when tragedy, and especially evil, walks among us. In a course on sacramental theology almost forty years ago now, Father Louis Weil was pretty matter of fact that about the reality that the great sacrament of healing is our death to this life and our rising to the life of the world to come. I’m sure I would not have expressed my faith in heaven that way growing up Southern Baptist, but I had no problem with Father Weil’s words when I heard them. Even when death is hard, the great sacrament of healing is not just death but rising to the life of the world to come.

Tonight’s gospel is the historic appointed gospel in the Christian West for the Easter Vigil—almost certainly because it’s the only gospel that sets the time of the visits of Mary Magdalene and the other to the grave as, “Now after the sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week”¹—before the dawn on the day we call Sunday.

In Matthew, at the tomb, the women are met by an angel of the Lord. The angel has rolled back the stone. No modern questions are asked or answered about the resurrection of Jesus. The angel tells the women, “He is not here; he is risen as he said.”² The evangelist tells

¹ Matthew 28:1.

² Matthew 28:6a.

us that the women were afraid but also, and only in Matthew, leaving the grave with “great joy.”³

Almost certainly it was in my first years of praying the Daily Office—reading the psalms—that I paid attention to the first verse of Psalm 19, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament”—the waters above skies in the Hebrew Bible—“shows his handiwork.”⁴ Philosophers call this the argument from creation. I call it the argument from life. Our human lives, with our joys and our struggles, I think and I believe, are signs of the life of the world to come.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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³ Matthew 28:8.

⁴ Psalm 19:1.