

## The Great Vigil of Easter

*Year B: Genesis 1:1–2:2; Psalm 36:5; Exodus 14:10–15:1; Song of Moses; Ezekiel 37:1–14; Psalm 30:1–6, 12–13 Romans 6:3–11; Psalm 114; Matthew 28:1–10*

Aidan Kavanagh was a Roman Catholic monk and liturgical scholar who taught for many years at Yale. His roots, however, were Episcopalian. He grew up in Saint Paul's Church in Waco, Texas, and was a graduate of the University of the South—Sewanee—an institution of the Episcopal Church. He became a monk at Saint Meinrad's Abbey, a Benedictine foundation in Indiana. I recently read somewhere that Father Kavanagh used to begin work with adults preparing for baptism by speaking about a grass blade: a living thing that no human being could create. If a person can grasp or be stirred by that truth, it will not surprise that the first sentence of the baptismal creed is "I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth."

Kavanagh was among the important liturgical scholars of his generation. His interest in baptism, mainly his focus on the renewal of adult baptism within the Roman Catholic Church, caught the hearts of many across denominational lines. He was quotable. One example: "The liturgy . . . exists not to educate but to seduce people into participating in common activity of the highest order, where one is freed to learn things which cannot be taught" (*Elements of Rite: A Handbook of Liturgical Style* [1982], 28).

On the morning of the resurrection, the angel of the Lord did not set out to upset the first of Jesus' disciples to go to his grave. They were, in Matthew, "Mary Mag'dalene and the other Mary" (Matthew 28:1)—probably Mary the mother of James and Joseph, who, in Matthew's narrative, was at the cross with her and the mother of the sons of Zebedee (Matthew 27:56).

An angel greets the two Marys and says, "Do not be afraid . . . I know that you seek Jesus . . . He is not here . . . he has risen . . . go quickly and tell his disciples . . . and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him" (Matthew 28:6–7). As they go, Jesus himself meets them. The Revised Standard Version translates Jesus' first words to them as, "Hail! Do not be afraid" (Matthew 28:10). There is every reason to translate it as "Rejoice! Do not be afraid." I do not think I would be afraid if someone I had known were raised from the dead. And there is no reason to translate the Greek word here as "brothers"—when it also means brothers and sisters. Matthew the evangelist may have been uncomfortable with the role of women in his community, but Paul was not, and nor was John the evangelist—nor was Jesus.

At some point, maybe five years into my time as rector in Indiana, the only sibling of an older woman in the congregation died. After the church service, we crossed the state line into the next town, which was in Michigan. There was a rural graveyard where members of their family had been buried for several generations. The woman's body had cremated.

When we arrived, things were ready for us. The hole had been dug—and I was glad to see that the dirt had not been covered up with artificial turf. (Digression: If the dirt is covered

up, I uncover before I begin.) I knelt in cassock, surplice, and stole, and placed the urn in the grave. I stood and read the words of the committal of the body. I threw dirt into the grave at the words, “we commit her body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust” (*The Book of Common Prayer* [1979], 501).

When I finished, I invited the congregation to do the same. The first to do so were two young grandsons of the woman who had died. There were a good number of people there and most of them did the same. The last to put her hand into the dirt was the woman’s sister. Very quickly she threw three handfuls of dirt into the grave. “The liturgy . . . exists not to educate but to seduce people into participating in common activity of the highest order, where one is freed to learn things which cannot be taught.”

Tonight, above all, we celebrate the Lord’s death and resurrection. Matthew’s gospel begins by proclaiming that the child Jesus is “‘Emmanuel’ (which means, God with us)” (Matthew 1:23). The one who brings us to water to be washed is the one who brings us to this table to eat and drink so that we can learn to live by faith. There is no one way God brings people to living water; there is no one way God brings us to his table. There is no one way we learn to live with the belief in the life of the world to come. I close with words from Isaiah, “The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever” (Isaiah 40:8).

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

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