

April 15, 2017

EASTER VIGIL

Matthew 28:1-10

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A church was putting on a big Easter play. The choir director was in charge. He selected the 6-year old boy with the sweetest face in the church for the opening scene in the play. He told the boy, “All you have to do is listen for the choir to sing these words, ‘And the angel lit the candle.’ Then you come on stage and you light all the candles.”

“I can do it! I can do it!” the little boy exclaimed, excited to be the one picked. Rehearsals came and went just fine, and the little angel had no problems. Finally, the big night arrived. The choir was in top form, and the stage was beautifully decorated with unlit candles all around, awaiting the moment when the cutest, littlest angel made his big entrance.

The play began. The curtain rose, the director gave his downbeat, the orchestra began to play, and the choir belted out the opening lines, ending with the little boy’s cue, “And the angel lit the candle.” Everyone looked stage right for his entrance.

No little boy. The director gave the downbeat again, and gestured for a louder line. The choir sang, “And the angel lit the candle,” and again, all eyes looked stage right.

No little boy. The director, beginning to sweat, motioned with great, sweeping gestures, and the choir thundered out the line – the curtains rippling from the volume – “AND THE ANGEL LIT THE CANDLE!!”

And into the silence which followed came a clear, boyish voice floating piercingly from stage right: "AND THE ANGEL DROPPED THE CANDLE INTO THE JOHN!"

Tonight is the Vigil of Easter. The curtain has risen on our Easter celebration. The major emphasis of tonight's worship service, if you haven't got it already, has to do with darkness and light -- the transition from darkness to light. Into the deadly darkness of the cross and the tomb, Easter light is shining. We're here to celebrate that into this world of darkness, a bright light has shone. That bright light is Jesus.

I don't believe that I have to convince you that this is a dark world. Here in North Carolina, we have our share of darkness, don't we? Crime, drugs, racism, sexism, poverty. Our American culture is shifting farther and farther away from God in so many ways. We're living daily in the darkness of ungodly temptations, moral relativism, war's dangers, terror's threats, and the constant reality of human suffering. There is darkness all around in this world of ours, and it finds its way into our families, into our neighborhoods, into our minds and our spirits.

It was a dark church we walked into tonight, and it's a dark world we walk around in every day. But I love how we get to visualize the transition, in this service, from darkness to light. Remember how Pastor Lew came down the dark aisle with that Easter candle? The light of Easter was infiltrating the darkness, dispelling the dimness, gleaming in the shadows.

And that's just a symbol of what the Easter victory of Jesus accomplished. Sin is darkness, Satan is darkness, death and the grave are darkness. And what did Jesus do? He shone light into the darkness. He conquered darkness. He came back to life at Easter, and he flipped the switch. The

power came on. The lights came up ... and all the darkness – sin, Satan, death, the grave – the darkness was gone!

It's a dark world, though, still, we know. It's a dark world still, the Lord knows. But there is hope. Easter gives us hope. Light has penetrated the darkness. Don't give up. Easter is the victory of light over darkness in our world, in our lives, in our hearts.

Do you know that victory? Do you have that light shining in your heart? When you blew out your candle earlier, was Jesus' light still shining within you? When you walk out the doors tonight, will yours be just a dark heart heading out into a dark world? Or a hope-filled heart glowing with Jesus' light, heading out into a world that needs the light only he can give?

On that first Easter morning, it was dark. It was early. The sun had just come up, and the women came to the tomb, thinking Jesus was dead. The sky was turning bright, but not their hearts. Not their spirits. Not their hope. Jesus, their Lord, had died. They were only going to anoint his dead body, which had been buried in a hurry a couple of days before.

But then the angel in the shining white robe spoke to them. He didn't forget his line, or drop his candle. The Easter angel said, "Don't be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, just as he said. Come, see the place where he lay." A message of victory, a message of God's triumph, a message of light for all the darkness those women had in their hearts and souls.

The women headed away from the tomb with hope-filled hearts. They didn't have all the answers. They still had fears, and questions, and moments of darkness and confusion. But

the message of Easter was shining in their hearts, even as they left the tomb.

And that's my prayer for each of you tonight. Take the light of Christ with you tonight. Take the message of Christ's resurrection victory as you go out into this dark world. Know that Jesus is alive, with power and promise for your life. Let his light shine into the darkness of your worries, your fears, your problems, your insecurities, your sin, your grief.

We live in a dark world, but tonight we celebrate the living light of Christ. Tonight the light of Christ is alive in you! Blessed Easter! Amen.