

Easter Vigil
St. Mark 16:1-8

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

It is finished! (John 19:30) Jesus commended His spirit into the Father's hand, breathed His last, and died. The work of your salvation is accomplished, completed, finished. Christ has died, and in His death is the remission of all of your sins.

The nails have been removed and the corpse taken down from the cross. His tattered body, full of holes, was cared for. A man named Joseph was given the task to care for the boy Jesus; another man named Joseph assumed the task to care for the body of Jesus. (cf. John 19:38)

His body was spiced and wrapped by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, whom Jesus told that he must be born again by water and the Spirit. (cf. John 3:1-8) They placed the body of Jesus in Joseph's new tomb; no one else had been buried there yet—it was empty. A stone was rolled in front of the tomb, closing in the lone corpse.

The Jews, claiming to be afraid that Jesus' disciples would rob His grave and claim that Jesus had risen, as He claimed He would, petitioned Pilate to secure the grave. Pilate gave them a guard to place at Joseph's tomb. (cf. Matthew 27:62-66) One must wonder, though, were they really afraid of people going into the grave or that Jesus might actually rise from the dead?

Jesus rested. It's the seventh day of the week of Passover, a very holy Sabbath.
Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. (Exodus 20:8-10)

Passover Sabbath, the seventh day of the week that commemorates YHWH's deliverance of the children of Israel from bondage to Egypt. It was the greatest time in the history of Israel; God took His people by the hand and removed them from under the oppression of the task masters in Egypt, and after 40 years brought them into a good land,
a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, that flow out of valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey; a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing; a land whose stones are iron and out of whose hills you can dig copper. When you have eaten and are full, then you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land which He has given you. (Deuteronomy 8:7b-10)

It was during those 40 years that God gave His people the Law—Ten Commandments and statutes and decrees. "So Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the judgments. And all the people answered with one voice and said, 'All the words which the LORD has said we will do.'" (Exodus 24:3) And the people grumbled against God and against Moses. Throughout those 40 years, they killed and lied, they stole and cheated, they committed acts of adultery. This pattern continued throughout the history of Israel. Still, they commemorated the Passover every year—these same Jews who proclaimed that they have never been in bondage to anyone (cf. John 8:33), every year celebrated their release from bondage in Egypt; they rejoiced that YHWH had rescued them, even recalling their oath to do all the words which the LORD has said—this Law and those statutes and decrees with which God prefaces, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." (Exodus 20:2)

It's so easy in faith to say, "Yes, Lord, all that you have said we will do." You have confessed as much, especially in those times when the pastor asked you before God, "Do you promise that with the aid of the Holy Spirit you will henceforth amend your sinful life?" And you declared so by saying, "I do promise." It's the same thing done with every confession of sins, if you think about it. You promised on oath by faith to amend your sinful life with the assistance of the Holy Spirit. So, did you? Or did you transgress the Law of God and His statutes and decrees in the very next moment, if not in word and deed, then certainly in thought? Did you fall right back into your sinful habits as soon as you crossed the threshold of those red double doors? Dear hearers, you have not kept your oath, else you would not have confessed your sins and received absolution the following week, or the week after that, or the week after that; you would not return here week after week, or even in the days between, to confess your sins and receive absolution.

You are right there in the Exodus camp with the children of Israel, killing and lying, stealing and cheating, and committing acts of adultery. You break your oath and turn your back on God. What would prevent God from turning His back on you?

Jesus! On the cross, the Father turned His back on Jesus. "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" (Matthew 27:46) To this, Jesus declared, "It is finished!" And He died. The Father's back is turned once-for-all to His Son on the cross. The Passover is fulfilled, as in Christ's death and the atonement He won for you on the cross is your own exodus from sin and death and true freedom from ultimate bondage. While you struggle with them, suffer on account of them, and cause others to suffer because of them, they no longer condemn you, for Jesus Christ was condemned in your place and sent to the grave. And there, Jesus rests on the holiest of Sabbaths—"He rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done." (Genesis 3:2b)

This might have been the happiest of times for the followers of Jesus, despite His death and burial, especially if they heeded His words. Yet, one must think that the question was constantly going through the minds of the women the entire time, intending to go to the grave to continue to care for the body once the Sabbath had ended. "Who will roll the stone away?" What is in that question? "Here we are, a few women faced with a giant stone in front of Jesus' tomb, and there is guard posted there to keep people out. How are we going to get in there?" This Sabbath, their minds and hearts are heavy.

Nonetheless, that morning they made their way to the tomb to offer such a loving and kind service to the body of the One who had given them so much. To their amazement, the stone was rolled away. What of the guard? Mark doesn't mention them. Matthew wrote that the sight of the stone being rolled away and an angel descending from heaven frightened them so that they fainted—they became like dead men. (cf. Matthew 28:2-4) Looking into the tomb, the women found no remains—the tomb is devoid of death! The angel was there and said, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" (Luke 24:5b)

Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid Him. The tomb is empty, Jesus is risen. Christ has died; Christ is risen!

Born once of a woman, born under the Law, this Jesus of Nazareth was born again from the womb of a tomb. The stone and seal could not keep Him in the grave. Bear this in mind, dear hearers, the stone was not rolled away for Jesus' benefit, but for that of the women and the disciples who stooped in to look. They saw the grave empty!

Dear baptized, Jesus' death is your death to sin. It is finished! Jesus' resurrection is your resurrection to new life. Into this you have been baptized, as you have heard tonight from Romans 6. As Christ was raised to life again, born a second time, as it were, from the grave, you have been given new life in the waters of Holy Baptism. There, at the font by water and the Word, you died with Christ to sin. There, at the font by water and the Word, a new man was born again in the way described to Nicodemus to life before God in righteousness and purity forever. There, at the font by water and the

Word, you were made a son of God and fellow heir with Christ of forgiveness, life, and salvation. There, at the font by water the Word, you were given faith—faith which lays hold of the grace of God, that forgiveness, life, and salvation, and makes them yours!

By this faith, this New Man, you are made, again and again, to confess your sins, to make the oath to amend your sinful life again and again. This New Man hates the Old Adam with which you struggle, and lays hold of the promise of God to give you all blessings for the life to come, even as it looks forward to the fulfillment of the promise to come again, raise you from the grave at the last day, and take you to be with Himself. Yes, you will go from here and sin again—this is your struggle as the two-natured sinner-saint that you are. But your God is faithful, as He visits you again and again in the crucified and risen Jesus Christ to forgive you for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.