



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

The Great Vigil of Easter (A) **April 11, 2020**

RCL: Exodus 14:10-31; 15:20-21; Psalm 114; Romans 6:3-11; Matthew 28:1-10

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

In the story of the parting of the Red Sea, we confront violence. Why was it necessary for such violence to occur in the release of captive Israel? The Lord demonstrates power over the elements and power over empire in the escape of the Israelites from Egypt in vivid and deadly imagery. With clear influences from the surrounding culture and religions, the God of Creation does battle with the forces of nature, as represented by the sea, and chaos, as represented by Pharaoh.¹ However, instead of explaining away difficult passages as incorporating surrounding myths, it is important to retain the tension between stories of violence like this one and our understanding of God as being just and grace-filled.

- Whom do we exclude from God's grace and love?
- Where do we find grace in seeking justice and judgment?

Psalm 114

In a conversation with the mountains, hills, rivers, and sea, the Psalmist considers the power of the Lord in this hymn of praise. The imagery captures the imagination; having grown up in California, the image of mountains and hills skipping like rams and young sheep resonates with me. Having seen rising waters in the Gulf of Mexico, I remember wishing that the seas would flee.

Nature at its most destructive can be an unstoppable force. The Psalmist declares the power of God as more than nature's equal, however. This psalm gives voice to wonder over the power from which the seas fled as the Israelites escaped Egypt and recollects the stopping of the Jordan when the Israelites crossed into the Promised Land with Joshua. But as the climate crisis heightens, we witness ever more frequent natural disasters. The power of the Lord over nature demonstrated in this psalm presents difficult questions to people who are displaced by rising waters, whose homes are destroyed, and whose lives are taken by the skipping mountains of earthquakes.

- Where is God when the earth trembles or the seas rise today?
- As Holy Saturday moves into the celebration of the Resurrection during the Great Vigil, how do we hold space for those who live in the wake of trauma and natural disaster?

¹ *Fortress Commentary on the Bible* draws the parallels between this and the narratives of the Canaanite and Babylonian religions. Published by the Office of Communication of The Episcopal Church, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017
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Romans 6:3-11

The movement from being dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus is a pivotal moment in the Great Vigil. We have witnessed the recitation of our history and renewed our baptismal vows, and the celebrant has announced, “Alleluia. Christ is risen.” The people responded, “The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.”

We have been buried with Christ. We have recalled our burial in baptism. And now we celebrate the Risen Christ. Death no longer has dominion over Christ. But what does it mean to have died and to be alive to God? What do we lose from the Passion if we move too quickly to resurrection? Having died for our sins, Christ retains his wounds. Death is always a part of Christ now, even in the newness of life. That can sound like bad news unless we remember that we all carry wounds, brokenness, and trauma. New life after death means something different than the old life – something transformational. It is this Christ, carrying the wounds of his death on the cross and raised by the glory of the Father, who can understand my pain and my brokenness. It is this Christ, who was broken and died for my sins, who offers me redemption out pain, new life out of my brokenness.

- How do we move through the fifty days of Easter with our wounds and brokenness?
- With the breaking of the bread at the Eucharist, how can we better lay our brokenness at the foot of the cross and move to new life, in the assurance that we are beloved no matter how broken we are?

Matthew 28:1-10

The lessons for the Vigil are full of earthquakes and other signs that things are not as we expect them to be. The guards are so frightened that they “became like dead men.” But, somehow, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary listen to the angel despite their fear, and they understand what is being asked of them. The angel’s appearance seems terrifying. And yet – they listen. They don’t waste time questioning the unexpectedness of their morning, they simply do as they are instructed; they carry a message of hope to the frightened disciples. In spite of the weird occurrences of their morning, the women stop only long enough to worship at the feet of Christ. Imagine a world where, rather than trying to rationalize our faith, we simply live into the Gospel every day.

- How can we retain the unexpectedness of the resurrection in a skeptical and tired world?
- In what ways are we afraid to carry the good news into the world?

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