

The Rev. Daren J. Zehnle
Annunciation Parish, Shumway, Illinois
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At the Vigil During the Holy Night of Easter

This very night, dear brothers and sisters, all that was foretold and promised through the prophets is fulfilled. In this night, all of salvation history takes place and Christ Jesus is raised from the dead!

This night heralds the beginning of a new creation, for the women went to the tomb of Jesus "on the first day of the week," the moment of a new beginning (Mark 16:2).

It was on the first day of creation that God created light. "Let there be light," he said, "and there was light" (Genesis 1:3). Creation had begun.

When the women arrived at the tomb, "the sun had risen," but it must have only begun to rise for it was still "very early" (Mark 16:2). The women saw the word of the Lord spoken through his prophet Malachi fulfilled: "But for you who fear my name, there will arise the sun of justice with its healing rays" (Malachi 3:20).

Saint Francis of Assisi praises Brother Sun because "he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor; and bears a likeness to You, O Most High."¹ The rising sun was a symbol of the Risen

¹ Saint Francis of Assisi, "The Canticle of Brother Sun", 4. In *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, Regis J. Armstrong and Ignatius C. Brady, eds. (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1982), 38.

Christ, just as the light of the paschal fire, which we blessed a short time ago and from which the paschal candle was lit, also symbolize the Risen Lord. The paschal candle was three times lifted high, that the "light of Christ, rising in glory, [might] dispel the darkness of our hearts and minds" as its healing rays fell upon us.²

But the women did not make this connection, so concerned were they with their final act of love for Jesus - the proper anointing of his body; their thoughts revolved around that stone. Yet their concern over the stone proved unwarranted, for "when they looked up," that is, when they looked to God, "they saw the stone had been rolled back" (Mark 16:4).

Do not misjudge this, my friends. The stone was rolled back "not to throw open a way for our Lord to come forth, but to provide evidence to people that he had already come forth."³ The stone was not moved for the Lord, but for us, that we, too, might enter into the tomb.

The stone at the tomb can also be said to be the stone that covers our hearts; it, too, must be rolled back if we are to see the evidence of the Risen Lord, if we are to encounter him. The three women could not roll the stone away themselves; neither

² *Roman Missal*, .

³ Saint Bede the Venerable, *Exposition on the Gospel of Mark*, 2.7. In *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament Vol. II, Mark*, Thomas C. Oden, et al. eds. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 1998), 230.

can we. With them, we ask, "Who will roll back the stone for us" (Mark 16:3)?

Is your heart shut this night? Are your eyes closed? Then hear the Lord say to you this night, as on the day of your Baptism, "Ephatha! Be opened" (Mark 7:34)!

Yet still you ask, "Who will roll back the stone for us?" That blessed Doctor of the Gospels, Saint Anthony of Padua, says to us, "O feeble minds! Draw near and look! Do not hesitate, and you will see the stone already rolled away."⁴ For who is that angel who rolled back the stone if not "the grace of the Holy Spirit, who removes the stone from the door of the sepulcher, strengthens our faith, smoothes out all the roughness, and sweetens all bitterness with the balm of his love?"⁵ Yes, cast your eyes to the Lord, and you will find the stone before your heart rolled away!

As they stood at the entrance to the tomb, the women knew God entered into human history, fulfilling the ancient prophesy given through Ezekiel: "And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live" (Ezekiel 37:13-14).

⁴ Saint Anthony of Padua, *Homily for Easter*, 9. In *Sermons for Sundays and Festivals, Vol I: General Prologue, Sundays from Septuagesima to Pentecost*, Paul Spilsbury, ed. (Padua, Italy: Edizioni Messaggero Padova, 2007), 238.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 238-329.

The Lord Jesus is able to raise us from our graves - to give us new life - because he himself has tasted death.

He died, but he vanquished death; in himself he put an end to what we feared... Where is death? Seek it in Christ, for it exists no longer; but it did exist and now it is dead... Be of good heart; it will die in us, also... But when? At the end of the world, at the resurrection of the dead in which we believe and concerning which we do not doubt.⁶

This is the promise he gives us in the Sacraments, the promise of everlasting life in God, the promise that will soon be given to one among us this night.

This new life, the very life of the Blessed Trinity, can be ours because that stone has been rolled back, suggesting the "unlocking of the sacraments of Christ."⁷ Before we give this everlasting life to Sandy, let us consider, just for a moment, that young man "sitting on the right side, clothed in a white robe," the sight of whom filled the women with utter amazement (Mark 16:5).

Saint Matthew described that heavenly messenger as having an appearance "like lightning, and his clothing white as snow" (Matthew 28:3). "In lightning, indeed, are dread and fear, but in snow there is the soothing quality of whiteness."⁸ The angel looked like lightning because God is fearful to sinners, but because he is soothing to the righteous the angel's robe was

⁶ Saint Augustine of Hippo, *Sermon 233.3-4*. In Oden, 232.

⁷ Saint Anthony of Padua, *Ibid.*, 238.

⁸ Saint Gregory the Great, *Homily 21*, in *Forty Gospel Homilies*. David Hurst, trans. (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1990), 159.

like snow. "By its very sight the angel might then frighten the condemned, and reassure the devout."⁹

Upon those who fear the Lord, the healing rays of the sun of justice, Christ the Lord, the Morning Star, have fallen and will fall, leading their hearts and minds to conversion, to love. For this reason, the angel says to the women, and to us, "Behold the place where they laid him" (Mark 16:6).

Let us, too, approach the empty tomb of our Lord in "utter amazement" (Mark 16:5). You, Sandy, are soon to die with Christ and to rise with him in the waters of Baptism. Approach these waters as though you approached the tomb of our Lord. Death is soon to be destroyed in you and you are soon to become one with Christ. Fully aware of what you are about to ask of the Church - and what she will ask of you - approach these waters with a holy fear and a loving confidence in the Lord's tender mercy, for "he has been raised" (Mark 16:6). Amen! Alleluia!

⁹ *Ibid.*