

Homily Easter Vigil  
March 26, 2016  
Grace, River Forest

Vigil Texts  
Romans 6:1-18  
John 20, 1-18

### Hearing the Family Stories

In Jesus' name. Amen

Lingchen, you have been baptized tonight into Jesus Christ, into his death and resurrection. But that's not the half of it. Baptized into Jesus, you are also baptized into a family – the church, the Body of Christ. And you know what happens when there is a newcomer in any family? They have to tell you all the family stories. And that's exactly what this evening has been about, Lingchen, sharing "the family stories" with you.

They are wonderful stories that, at their heart, are love songs, from God to us, Jesus' family.

Take, for example, the first story, the story of how God – with a word – created out of the darkness a beautiful world for the human family, and created us to reflect God's own image.

And then there is the story of when the creatures God had made seemed hell-bent on killing one another and ruining God's green acres. God first sent a flood, but then resolved to put up with humankind, despite the evil inclinations of

their/our hearts, giving the whole world in Noah and the ark the chance for a new start.

And then there's the family story of God providing a ram in a thicket for Abraham and for us, when we face apparent loss and an empty future. And the celebratory story of our ancestors on the far shore of the Red Sea, when God "triumphed gloriously," and saved Israel from slavery in Egypt, tossing the Egyptian soldiers into the sea.

There is the story of "them bones, them dry bones" in Ezekiel, and the word of the Lord which can connect those bones back together again, and put flesh and skin on them, and breathes God's own life back into them. And then there are the two family stories that reveal God's quirky and whimsical sense of humor: the first, when in response to Jonah's call to repent, the king decrees that all the inhabitants of Nineveh – not just the people, but every cow and pig and other animal "shall be covered in sackcloth," in the hope that God might relent and not destroy them; and then the puncturing of King Nebuchadnezzar's pomposity when his fiery, stoked up furnace can't even singe one hair on the head of God's faithful servants!

And here, now, we have heard one of the most important family stories – of Mary Magdalene looking for the body of Jesus in the tomb where he had been buried.

Before his death, Jesus was no stranger to Mary Magdalene. He was the reason her life had turned around. She loved him perhaps more than life itself. She remembered his voice and touch, which had released her from inner chaos and enabled her to no longer be an outcast, but instead part of Jesus' family. She loved to stand in the crowd and observe Jesus doing for others what he had done for her: welcoming them, touching and healing them, giving them back their life and restoring them to human community again. No, Jesus was no stranger to Mary. She would have known him anywhere.

And when things she prayed wouldn't happen did, when Jesus was crucified like a common criminal outside Jerusalem, Mary was no stranger to that either. Most of the disciples were in hiding, but Mary Magdalene and several of the other women just could not stay away. They had to see – even from a distance – what Jesus' final hours were like, and where they took his body. No, Mary was no stranger to Jesus' final agony.

In John's Gospel Mary comes alone to the garden where Jesus' body was laid. She was there because she was grieving, mourning the death of the one who had given her life direction, meaning and purpose.

But what did Mary find there in the garden? What she found was not a dead body, but an empty tomb. What she found there were the linen wrappings, the swaddling clothes in which Jesus' dead body had been wrapped, and "the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself." (John 20:6-7) What she found there were two angels in the tomb, who didn't seem to faze her in the least because she was so intent on getting Jesus' body back. And what she found there was a stranger who was Christ himself, whom she didn't recognize, but supposed to be the gardener.

What kept Mary from recognizing Jesus, do you think? Was it her expectations that the dead stay dead that kept her from recognizing him? Was it a change in Jesus' resurrected body? Tears blurring her vision? Whatever the reason, Mary Magdalene mistook Jesus for the gardener, until he said her name: "Mary." And then the risen Christ was stranger to her no more.

Then Mary realized that Jesus was not a gardener, arranging the floral pieces on the caskets of our lives, prettying up or trying to disguise the odor of sin and death and loss in our lives. But that Jesus was the one who came from God,

and was God, who entered our world at Bethlehem so that he would be no stranger to all those things in our lives that eat away at us, entomb us and separate us from God and one another. When Jesus called her by name, Mary recognized that Jesus was not the gardener at all, but the one who as the carpenter's son, in his youth, made tables for people to gather around. She recognized him not as the gardener, but the carpenter who with two planks of wood fashioned together and nails pounded into his hands and feet was no stranger to anguish and abandonment and death. Who as the risen Lord overcame all these things so that we can be no stranger to life and joy and community and love. How did Mary discover this? Because carpenters in Jesus' time, when they were finished with their work at someone's house, would take their carpenter's rag, and fold it or roll it up and place it on the doorstep of the house where they had been working, as a signal that their project was completed. That's the meaning of "the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings [in the tomb] but rolled up in a place by itself." It was a sign that Jesus' construction project, his re-modeling and refinishing of the world, for life rather than death, has been completed.

And what do **we** find at the tomb this night? We find the Lord who has called you, Lingshen, and all of us by name in baptism. We find the carpenter

from Nazareth who has made for us a table to gather around, so that we might be among those who “eat and drink with [Jesus] after he rose from the dead.” What we find here this night is not an armchair for us to sit in and look out of our window as a dying world passes by, but a calling from God, Lingchen, to be witnesses of the resurrection, like Mary Magdalene was. What we find is that One who was no stranger to death desiring to give us the gift of life, and longing to take us – as family – along with him on his journey home, to his Father and our Father.

For the carpenter who has completed his work and is arisen, let us, Jesus’ family, say, “Thanks be to God.” Amen.