

EASTER VIGIL – 2023

On this holiest night of the entire Church year, it is a great joy and privilege to celebrate with you the greatest news ever proclaimed: Jesus Christ is risen from the dead! I'm very glad that you are here tonight to share in this joy, and I want to wish you and all your loved ones a very blessed Easter season that begins tonight and continues for fifty days until the feast of Pentecost. May the joy and the strength of the risen Christ be with you always.

During this Holy Week we have been reflecting on a passage from the second reading for Palm Sunday from St. Paul's letter to the Philippians in which he spoke of how Christ Jesus, 'though he was in the form of God, ...emptied himself...becoming obedient to the point of death...on a cross.' The events that we remember during Holy Week remind us of the many ways that Jesus experienced that self-emptying, especially through his suffering and death on that cross.

But tonight we celebrate another kind of emptiness: Jesus' dead body was placed in a grave, as usually happens after someone has died. But tonight's gospel reminds us that when the women went to Jesus' tomb, the angel told them that Jesus "has been raised just as he said"—in other words, **THE GRAVE WAS EMPTY!** He had indeed emptied himself in so many ways on our behalf, but now the tables were turned on death—the grave is emptied, and Jesus is wondrously and eternally alive, never again to know death.

Imagine that you are going to the cemetery to visit the graves of your loved ones who are buried there—maybe your parents or spouse or child or brother or sister or anyone else close to you. Perhaps it's Memorial Day, or you just feel a need or desire to pray there. Now, imagine that instead of some quiet time in prayer and perhaps shedding a tear or two in sadness, you see and hear an angel tell you what the angel told Mary Magdalene and the other Mary: "the one you love has been raised from the dead; he/she is not here!" Wouldn't you be at first startled and maybe more than a little frightened? And then as the reality slowly sunk in, wouldn't you be filled with a joy and an ecstasy that you couldn't put into words?

Guess what, folks: that is precisely what the risen Christ makes available to us—that kind of a joy that will have no end. And that means that death does not have the last word for any of us; death is ultimately not to be feared. Yes, we endure the cross, we experience loss and sadness. Our own Good Fridays are all too real, but even more real is the joy of emptiness—the emptiness of Jesus' tomb because he has risen. In the Stations of the Cross we prayed yesterday here in Elma, the 14th Station (Jesus is buried in the tomb) had this thought: "This tomb [of Jesus] represents every tomb I stand before with fear, in defeat, struggling to believe it could ever be empty." Maybe we wonder about our own rising from the dead; will our own tomb really be empty one day? Yes- it will indeed happen. Jesus promised it, and his own rising verifies and proves the truth and the trustworthiness of his promise. O, blessed emptiness of the tomb of the risen Christ!