

Easter Triduum

EASTER VIGIL MESSAGE, Rev. Cooper Conway, March 31, 2018



Holy Thursday



Good Friday



Easter Sunday

“Rejoice now heavenly hosts and choirs of angels and let your trumpets shout salvation”

Here we are on day 3 (the final lap) of the celebration called the “triduum”.

On Maundy Thursday after the foot washing, we have received Jesus’ command to do as he has done - to be active and to love one another as he loves us (on Maundy Thursday we have been assigned works.)

On Good Friday, we have followed the progress of Jesus as he suffered and died and demonstrated God’s love for us. So on Good Friday we have been witnesses to God’s grace which blesses us...it emboldens us.

But tonight...tonight we celebrate because tonight the works and grace of God come together to re-frame our relationship to sin and to begin to lead us to firmer footing. Tonight we stand on the edge of hope - “rejoice” we tell ourselves. We may not be at Easter yet --but tonight we remember...we imagine and ...we wonder.

We remember salvation history - the long story of God. We imagine a better, kinder world with a happy ending and we wonder at the promises of our Almighty God.

Tonight is the night of “what if”.

What if we accept God’s Grace?

What if we follow through on it with good works?

What if we hope for something better?

In the Gospel we just we just heard from Mark, a young man dressed in a white robe tells Mary Magdalene and the other women that “He is raised.” And then we are told that the women flee in terror and amazement. They hear the words of this man and find themselves balanced between human fear and eternal hope. But where will “they land? Where will we?

“Rejoice!” - don’t slip back “Rejoice” we tell ourselves - and we are right.

Most recently I read a story by James McBride, the title of the story is “The Moaning Bench.” It begins with a courtroom scene: 5 people in blue terry cloth robes sit on a bench together. Then a hooded figure with gnarled hands called “the gate keeper” strides into the room and seats himself behind a huge mahogany desk. It is obvious he is there to judge the 5 and he proceeds to question them - all are culpable of some sin - but none are notorious sinners.

-One’s a well-regarded “pillar of the community” - and a hypocrite.

-Another is a middle aged woman who is cheating on her husband

-Another is a flag waving, word loving, good old boy with a drinking problem.

-Another is a sullen and disobedient pre-teen girl.

-And the last is a prizefighter plucked from the ring in the midst of a fight.

Now the gate keeper questions and bullies each one in turn - sometimes even terrorizing them by extending a magic finger to choke them from afar. And one by one the gate keeper demeans and discredits his fearful subjects. That is, until he comes to the prizefighter Rackman Babatunde, “father of four, man of one, seventh son of the seventh son.” And although the gate keeper tries his magic finger choke hold on Rackman...nothing happens. And Rackman begins shadow boxing: swinging rights and lefts. “He’s just a bunch of old card tricks,

they don't work on me 'cause I'm the greatest." Then, the fighter turns his back on the gate keeper, and keeps "ducking and dodging, whistling punches in the air."

Till he sees the 4 seated on the bench who are staring behind him - then he turns to see that the gate keeper has lowered his hood to reveal "the grim countenance of Blue Higgens" (the fighter Rachman has just been in the ring with back on earth.)

"Blue, why are you here?!" Rachman cries. "I'm not Blue" (Says the gate keeper). I'm the sum of all the evil knowledge that lives in all of you." "Well, if I'd a know that my fears were that ugly - I'd a sued 'em" Rachman replies. Now long story short ---the gate keeper encourages the 4 bench sitting sinners to bet on a fight between him (as Blue) and Rachman. Whoever picks the winner gets to go home. All 4 bet on Rackman and one deal is they and Rachman too (if he wins) will all be sent back to their lives on earth. So then - the fight starts in earnest. The gate keeper cheats with an early wallop. Rachman recovers and whups on the gate keeper and back and forth it goes. Till finally it seems that Rachman is finished and they are all doomed. - But as Rachman keeps himself upright by hugging the gate keeper...he whispers something in the gate keeper's ear and the gate keeper blanches and falls like a stone, unconscious...Rachman wins the match!

Immediately a large wooden door behind the gatekeeper's desk opens with a swirl of fierce hot wind and Rachman is lifted from his feet and flown across the room on his back and zipped out through the open door. The gate keeper comes to and resumes his place and persona behind the desk. The four remaining prisoners are horrified. And though they are commanded to sit on the bench in order to be "sent home" - they refuse to do it.

"Rachman saved us and he should be there too!" the good old boy insists. "A deal is a deal." "But," says the gatekeeper, when you get home you won't even remember him!" "None-the-less, the group, led by this God fearing drinker, one by one they repent their sins and shose to follow Rachman into the blazing unknown. (behind the door.) They accept God's grace, Follow then with works and hope for something better.

But that's not where the story ends. Magically, we find ourselves back in the ring where Rachman and the real "Blue" have gone 7 grueling rounds leaving Rachman the clear winner. And the victorious Rachman as he marches from the ring through the crowds takes a detour to find 4 people he doesn't know seated in the middle of a row. They are a businessman (pillar of the community), a middle aged woman, a good old boy, and a young girl.

He faces them shyly...uncertain. They admire him - also uncertain. The good old boy asks "What makes you great?" And Rachman takes him in a bear hug and whispers in his ear - later the woman asks "What did he say?" "Well," the man tells her, "He said he loved his opponent Blue. He loved the evil in Blue - he loves the evil in us all because in loving all evil he loves the evil in himself enough to surrender it to God who washes it clean. "He's loving what God made", is what he said.

The Triduum - our 3 day Holy Week Journey is a pilgrimage into love: the acceptance of the grace of God's love, the living out of God's love through works, and the challenge of stepping into the unknown tonight as we remember, imagine, and wonder at the story of Jesus. Tonight reframes our relationship to sin. And so, tonight we rejoice because we stand on the edge of hope where we can see that God loves what God has made and therefore we have nothing to fear.