

EASTER VIGILANT

The Great Vigil of Easter

April 15, 2017

On a vigil, we are vigilant. We watch. We are *watchful*. But what do we watch for, in a spiritual or religious sense? Maybe we watch for a teacher. Or for a lesson. Maybe we watch for a way to do things. Maybe we watch for a way out of a dilemma, or a bind that we're in. Or a way back from a dead end. Or maybe we watch for chances to become the people God wants us to be. Maybe *this* is our Easter Vigil: to learn to watch through the eyes of Christ.

Listen to Emerson, our great American preacher-philosopher, talk about Jesus to the graduating students of the Divinity School in Cambridge, in July of 1838:

Jesus belonged to the true race of prophets. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul. Drawn by its severe harmony, ravished with its beauty, he lived in it, and had his being there. Alone in all history, he estimated the greatness of man. One man was true to what is in you and me. He saw that God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of the world. He said, in this jubilee of divine emotion, "I am divine. Through me, God acts; through me, speaks. Would you see God, see me; or, see thee, when thou also thinkest as I now think."

Or, as the biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan says, if you want to know what God looks like in sandals, look at Jesus of Nazareth.

These are very American ideas, combining as they do individualism and the divine. They have been heresy in the church in the past, but we live in a less fearful time and place, and I thank God for it. Many theologians around the world now share these ideas to one degree or another, but of course many others do not. To me, Emerson's ideas have enlarged what speaks to our hearts in Christian revelation.

So: If you watch this Easter Vigil for renewal, and the path to renewal, pay attention to Emerson. Read his "Divinity School Address," which caused a great scandal among churchmen of his time.

Sometimes the growth and renewal we are called to is huge, and requires hard work and serious reflection. Almost every spring around this time, as her classes in creative writing end, Lorene says something striking and relevant to the life of the spirit when she talks about her individual conferences with writing students. I remember when she mentioned a while back working intensively and intensely with a student to help her reach down into herself to revise her writing into what it should be. It's not just about editing or rewriting, she told the student: for her writing to improve and deepen to the degree she wanted, she *herself* would have to grow and change and deepen.

This is a signpost, a life sign, I would say, pointing us toward what our Baptismal Covenant calls "new birth by water and the Holy Spirit"; toward what the New Testament calls new life; and toward what the theologian Paul

Tillich called New Being. Tonight, we watch for its greatest manifestation, as Emerson knew. But I ask myself—and I ask you—to watch for its small happenings—and its largest ones—that lie at the heart of our Christian faith. Our new lives in baptism and the coming of Easter promise us miracles, after all. But what kind of miracles should we watch for? Again, Emerson suggests that the church may not be the best place to look for an answer:

[Jesus] spoke of miracles; [he writes,] for he felt that man's life was miracle, and all that man [does], and he knew that this daily miracle shines, as the character ascends. But the word Miracle, as pronounced by Christian churches, gives a false impression; it is Monster. It is not one with the blowing clover and the falling rain.

How does our character “ascend,” as Emerson puts it? How do we learn to see more as Jesus saw? Here’s one path toward it, traced by the Anglican priest and writer Kenneth Leech. He insists that it is not enough to be “spiritual”: the Christian must see the world whole. “There is no shortage of ‘spirituality,’ he writes. “But we are being offered spirituality as another product on the market. Much of it lacks ... grief, struggle, rage and passion.... Much contemporary spirituality lacks the imaginative encounter with poverty, pain and dereliction. It is a spirituality which has ceased to struggle and which therefore has ceased to be in Christ.”

“To recognize in the pain of others, in the broken and crushed people of the world, the form of the wounded Christ, is to recognize the strange and

demanding nature of the gospel call. It is the call to perform the corporal works of mercy: to feed the hungry; to clothe the naked; to shelter the homeless poor; to break the fetters of injustice; to give drink to the thirsty; to visit the sick; to bury the dead. It is a call to gird ourselves with Christ's dirty towel and to wash his feet, those bloody, wounded, exhausted feet. Christ's feet, his wounded hands and side, his broken heart, are not to be found only in ancient Jerusalem, but in Manchester and London, in Chicago and Boston, in Santiago and Johannesburg, in the back streets of the earth, wherever his sisters and brothers are crushed and broken and cast down as persons of no significance."

Passionate words. But what of action? Well, since we're talking about individualism, we can begin with Thomas Carlyle's famous words: "Make yourself an honest man, and then you may be sure that there is one less scoundrel in the world." And I would say that also includes being honest about ourselves, about our failings and the possibilities that lie before us if we found the strength to do what we know Jesus would have us do

The job of God's people is to help heal the world, however we can find to do it; you can look at where it is happening here in this church and in Doylestown; you may well be doing it yourselves in the world around you.

Emerson's Jesus says, "Through me, God acts; through me, speaks. Would you see God, see me; or, see thee, when thou also thinkest as I now think." Through us, God

acts; through you, God speaks. Would you see God, look to Christ risen, or see us, his Easter people, when we are able to think and act as he thought and acted. Let us pray for it, and pray that we can live as the men and women and children he would have us be.

—*The Rev. Robert C. Smith*
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
Doylestown, Pennsylvania