

Easter Vigil 2008
The Cathedral Church of the Holy Trinity
Paris, France
The Rt. Rev. Pierre Whalon

As we go through the presidential campaign in the United States, the press is out looking for “skeletons in the closet.” This American expression means that the candidates have secrets they don’t want others to know. I think everyone has “skeletons in the closet.” Everyone has something buried in a grave we have dug in our hearts, deep in the fiber of our being. These could be something evil, something we are ashamed of. Buried in the grave of our heart could be a failed marriage, unfinished business with someone who has died, a cherished dream that has been shattered forever, or other deaths, small or great.

And we respond differently each to our own graves in our hearts. Some people try to forget them, until some memory re-opens the pain. Others of us visit them regularly—especially at three in the morning.

I want to tell you about one of mine. Ordinarily I do not like confessional sermons, especially the trend today of preachers who always take you along for a ride on their spiritual journey.

But tonight is the greatest liturgy of the year, the Easter Vigil. We are re-telling the whole story, from the creation of the universe to its end. In various glorious ways, we are celebrating being the People of God, the Heirs of the Kingdom. This night of all nights calls for a personal witness.

At the age of twenty-one, I fell in love. It happens... My beloved was an organist like me, and we got married, and moved to France to study organ with Jean Langlais, the organist at Ste. Clothilde not far from here. I thought I was living my dream, studying with the great organist and composer, and marrying a beautiful woman to start a family. We found a little place off la rue de la Gaîté in the 14th. Actually, it was a dead-end, “l’Impasse de la Gaîté.” What irony—the “Dead-End of Happiness.” There were problems. Let me not elaborate. Let’s just say she was not meant for married life, and I was too immature to handle it. We came back to the States, separated, and divorced.

It was a terrible blow to my pride to have my marriage fall apart. For I was well-educated, you see, philosophically trained to live life with sophistication. I wasn’t supposed to screw up. My dream had died. I had married in the Catholic Church, even though my belief was very vague. You only get one shot, and I had blown it. My dream of founding a family was shattered as my marriage died. And I dug its grave in my heart.

You here with me tonight know, I believe, what I am talking about. Which is why, of course, I am telling you about this story from my past. What is buried in the graves of each of our hearts is as different as each of us is. It is your own. And you have been living alone with your grief more or less badly. And yet, we are all the same in this respect.

The story we are telling tonight is about us dead in our sins, needing healing from evil done to us, needing new life. And we are telling about our God, who never leaves anything dead in a grave for long. God comes looking for us, sending messengers of the resurrection that awaits, not just after physical death, but also for the emotional and spiritual dead things in the graves of our hearts.

And these messengers are always surprising, out of left field. One day, I was alone in my little apartment on the “Dead-End of Happiness,” when I heard a knock. I opened the door to see two young, well-scrubbed men standing there. I asked them what they wanted. One said, “we want to talk to you about Jesus.”

It hit me then that here I was, organist, going to church every Sunday to hear my teacher play, listening to the frankly mediocre sermons then preached in that church, but no one ever talked to me about Jesus. I invited them in.

Have you ever had that knock on your door? Have you ever opened to...the Jehovah's Witnesses?

Now in those days I had gone from rejecting the Roman Church, through a phase as an atheist, and had begun vaguely to think there was a God. I could feel intimations of something divine in the music I played and studied, and it attracted me. As you listen to the glorious music of our musicians and choir tonight, I am sure you know what I mean.

As the Witnesses described their joyless stripped-down version of real Christianity, they kept justifying it by saying that it was all in the Bible. Now, I had had the blessing of a solid Benedictine education in high school. In my sophomore year I had Dom Thomas for Christian education, ironically a former Episcopal priest become Roman monk. He announced on our first day of class that he would be “damned” if any of his boys knew the Bible any less well than any Baptist boy. So we were “damned” to have him drill the Bible into our skulls all year long. You must admit, it has served me very well, seeing how things have turned out.

So I knew that their narrow horrible religion didn't jibe with what I remembered the Bible saying. Yet they kept saying that their religion was all in the Bible. I didn't own one—who needs a Bible? I bought one from them.

The Witness Bible is the King James Version, with some commas re-arranged to “prove” their heresies. And they translate it word-for-word into French, which makes for some hilarious reading.

But looking back, I can see I was afraid there was a chance they might be right. I read that Bible very intently. We scheduled a meeting where they would respond to all my questions. They brought their elder along. We were arguing over some point of doctrine when the elder told me that I must have been finding all these verses in my corrupt Catholic Bible. Very innocently, I pushed the Witness Bible across the table. “I found it in yours.” Suddenly they got up. They left without a word. And never came back.

But I kept reading the Bible on my way to and from work. (I paid my studies by working as a croupier running a gambling game in the place Clichy—good training for a future priest.) Eventually I realized that Jesus is alive, exactly what we are proclaiming tonight. That his death and resurrection are not just something that happened two thousand years ago, but that it is happening now. That Jesus is alive *now*. That we have the forgiveness of sins already—all we have to do is tap into it. That God is waiting to heal us now. That God wants to resurrect us from our graves, not just one day, but right now. Tonight.

All we have to do is accept. One day I was reading the story of King David fleeing from Jerusalem as his son Absalom was attacking him. Abiathar the priest comes to him with the most sacred symbol of Israel, the Ark of the Covenant. He tells David that with the Ark, God will surely bring him back. But the king refuses to take it, saying that if God wants him to return, he will bring him home.

I found myself praying the simplest of prayers, that God would bring me home. That day, thirty-one years ago, something happened. I cannot say exactly what, but as you see today, there was a big change.

Eventually the marriage was annulled. I was able to fall in love and marry again—God raised up what I had buried in my heart. But even more deeply and importantly, I became new myself, in the depths of my heart. The Resurrection we proclaim tonight began to work in me, and it has not stopped. All I had to do was to accept it. All I had to do was to say “yes.”

The Great Vigil of Easter is telling your story tonight. It is the greatest story anyone has ever told. It is about God’s love for you. God created you from the muck and mire, so as to love you. God has seen your hurt and your pain, your guilt and your shame, and our great fear of death, and has come in Jesus to live it with us. Christ died that you might live. He rose again so that you could rise up from your grave, physically one day, but right now, from the graves dug in your hearts. Are you ill? God is waiting to heal you. Are you grieving? God is here to comfort you. Whatever is lying in the darkness of your heart, God knows it and loves you despite it, and will give it the resurrection.

All around you there are messengers that God is sending to you. In my case they were pretty weird. You might think the messenger God has sent you tonight is pretty weird too!

I told you of one such grave in my heart. I still have more, for which I still need to accept God’s loving, healing resurrection. So do you. So do we all.

The Resurrection is right now, tonight, this night of nights. It is God’s ultimate gift to you, the power to overcome death and find new life that never ends. All we have to do is accept the gift. You can make a sign that you are accepting God’s gift by coming forward in a few minutes to receive Holy Communion. Perhaps it has been a very long time since you last took Communion. Perhaps you are not sure you are ready. You can always come forward, your arms crossed on your chest, to receive a special prayer of blessing. Or you can just sit right where you are and speak in your heart, “yes.”

But one way or another, however you mark it, say yes to God. Say yes to new and eternal life. Say yes to healing and new joy.

Say yes.

Yes.

Yes.