

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

It was late in the afternoon on Friday, Day 1, and Jesus was taken down from the cross. He was laid in a new tomb, a stone rolled over the opening. Joseph and Nicodemus had to work quickly. Saturday, the Sabbath, when no one could work, was almost upon them. Remember, according to the Jewish reckoning, one day ended and another began in the evening.

The tomb was later sealed, and a guard of soldiers was posted. They were posted there with a purpose: Keep that man in the tomb. He had said, “*After three days, I will rise again,*” and nothing like that can happen. Stay awake. Keep vigil. Watch for this impostor’s disciples, that they don’t come and steal away the body and then claim that Jesus “*has risen from the dead*” (Matt. 27:63-64).

The soldiers kept vigil. These soldiers were likely Roman soldiers. Pilate gave the chief priests and Pharisees, at their request, guards to stand watch over the tomb. They were soldiers, and it is not good for soldiers to fall asleep on the job. No doubt, they stayed awake throughout the night and the day; they kept vigil on the Sabbath, Day 2.

Now, it’s the evening of our Saturday, and again according to Jewish reckoning, the day is changing from the Sabbath to the first day of the week. We call it the Lord’s Day because of what happened. It’s Day 3. The soldiers were still awake, keeping watch, and so are we, but for different purposes. The soldiers wanted to keep Jesus’ body in the tomb. We know they were not successful.

Any moment now, on that third day, breath would return to Jesus’ dead body. Blood would again start coursing through His veins. His human spirit, given up in death on the cross, would return from the Father’s keeping and reanimate Jesus’ lifeless body. Jesus would become alive again. That is resurrection, and that is why we are holding vigil tonight. Not to see the risen Jesus, but to proclaim that sometime early on the third day, when it was still night outside, Jesus rose from the dead, just as He said He would. Three days in the grave, and now Jesus lives. We look at the stone and the seal and the soldiers and think “What a paltry attempt to keep the Author of Life in that tomb.”

We don’t know exactly when Jesus rose from the dead. The women came early with spices in hand so that they could finish with tenderness the job that Joseph and Nicodemus did with haste — anoint His dead body. They hurried to the tomb after the sun had risen, but it was too late. An angel was there, but Jesus was not. With power that caused the earth to quake, the angel rolled the stone and then invited the women to peer inside. They didn’t see Jesus; He had already departed the tomb. The place where Jesus’ body had lain was empty. He had risen victorious from the dead. He had descended into hell, proclaiming that victory. And soon, He

would show His “flesh and bones” body to the women, and to the eleven, and to other disciples.

But not during the night, as we hold vigil. Tonight we do not see the risen Jesus. Tonight we wait and watch and, with the angel, proclaim “Jesus is not in the tomb for He has risen; He is living.”

Symbolic of that is the new flame lighted upon the Paschal Candle: the light of life has returned into the body of Christ, a light snuffed out by the cross. Tonight, we see the light, but we do not yet see the risen Christ. But we have proclaimed that the brilliance of this light is now poured out on you—by the word, and the water combined with that word, creative water, saving water, life-giving water, life-sustaining water, cleansing water. United to the rekindled Light of Life by water, the ancient darkness has been forever banished for us. Since Christ, the Life, arose this night from the dead, we, God’s faithful people, are delivered from bondage to sin, and are restored to life and immortality.

So tonight as we enter into Day 3, we are on vigil, like good soldiers of the cross. We stay awake and watch, not to keep Jesus in the tomb, but because we know that the tomb could not hold Jesus risen from the dead. We hold vigil to shine the light in a world mired in darkness, “The Light of Christ,” to confess the truth to a world that hardly recognizes it, “Christ is risen; He is living,” to proclaim hope to a world of hopelessness, “In His life is our life.”

In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit.