

Easter Vigil, 2024

(OSF)

Do you remember, years ago when you were a child, being terrified to look under the bed at night? All kinds of monsters lurked there! Then, one night, some angel in the form of your mom or dad showed you that there was nothing to be afraid of, that there were no monsters under the bed ready to grab you and eat you up.

But then you experienced a new set of anxieties. As you got older, your nerve could not keep up with your hormones. *I look like a freak! How come I'm not as pretty or as good looking as the other kids in my class? Everybody thinks I'm a jerk or an airhead or a nerd or a dumb jock.* But then some angel in the form of a friend convinced you that you were OK, that, while you may not be cover model material, you were not a hideous troll, either.

The next scary place in your life might have been the classroom or the laboratory or your first job or the novitiate. You were afraid that you would flunk or fail, that you would wash out, that you wouldn't be considered holy enough for religious life. But an angel in the form of a wise teacher or a generous mentor helped you through it all.

We are all afraid sometimes—scared of some private or public demon, some fear that terrifies us almost to the point of debilitation—the fear that I will run out of time, that I will never be loved by anyone, that I will be hurt, that what I believe and trust most will leave me shattered. And yet, if we are willing to face our fears—sometimes with the help of an angel—we can break the shackles of the fears that enslave us and discover a wonderful newness in our lives.

The angel's words to the women in tonight's gospel—*Do not be afraid or amazed*—are the empowering words of Easter. Easter is the freedom from fearing the *ultimate* terror—death. In the resurrection of Jesus, God promises us that this life he has given us does not end in the tomb but begins a new and glorious chapter beyond the grave. The reality of the empty tomb should help us put all of our other fears in perspective: God is present to us in every act of “fearless” kindness, compassion and forgiveness extended to us and that we extend to others.

In ancient days, tonight's celebration, the Easter Vigil, was called the “mother of feasts.” The image that comes to me is that of a family reunion. Several generations are present. Someone goes up to the oldest couple and says, “See what you started!” In a way that is what the rest of the year with all its feasts and celebrations says to the Easter Vigil, “See what you started!”

Family reunions often become a time when the photo albums are pulled out. Tonight the Church pulls out the family album and we look at some of the memorable times and people in our family history. The pictures and the stories unfold: fire and light, water and deserts, quail and manna, Moses and Pharaoh, chariots and mud, stony hearts and natural hearts, death and life, defeat and victory, empty tombs and angels dressed in lightning bolts.

But the album also contains wonderful *new* pictures we haven't seen before. These are not just still shots; they are *moving* pictures. As we look into the album we see millions of people in parishes all over the world, walking into its pages. They are coming, to be washed in the waters of Baptism, to become part of our Church and to be gifted with the spirit of Jesus—the Holy Spirit.

As Bishop Thomas mentioned in his Chrism Mass homily this past Tuesday, there is something profoundly beautiful and moving in seeing someone discover and embrace something which at times *we* criticize, gripe about or generally take for granted, but something we also deeply love—our faith and our Church. It gives us a renewed sense of pride in who we are. It overcomes us with humble gratitude for the gift of faith. It is a gift given to each of us by neophytes all over the world, entering our Church this night.

May this Easter celebration transform all of us—new Catholics and old—from the prisoners of our fears into the angels of the Easter proclamation.