

Once Upon A Time
The Great Vigil of Easter

Once upon a time it was dark. So dark that you could not see anything. Of course there was not anything to see. There was only God. And God said, "Let there be light." In the first moment of time, a moment so small you cannot even call it a moment, at the center of a universe that did not yet exist, there was a bright light. Out of that Light poured the galaxies, of billions of stars, planets, comets, asteroids, molecules, atoms, electrons, all whirling, circling ever outward from the Light.

In one of those galaxies, spinning around one of those stars, God saw a planet. It was a very dark planet. So dark that you could not see anything. Of course there was not anything to see. There was only the breath of God, moving over the waters that He formed from the cooling of the planet. And God said, "Let there be land." And up flung the mountains, and down went the valleys, and rushing along went the rivers, down to the seas.

And God said, "Let there be plants." And up sprung apple trees and raspberry bushes and redwoods so tall their tops scraped the blue sky.

And God said, "Let there be fish in those rivers and seas. And let there be birds in those trees." And the catfish started jumping and the whales started whistling and the eagles started soaring and the bluebirds started singing.

And God said, "Let there be cats and dogs and elephants and turtles and snakes." And snakes started slithering and turtles stuck their heads out from their shells and elephants blew loud songs on their trunks and kittens chased their tails and puppies barked at them all.

And then God said, "Let's make something just like us. Something that can love everything we made." And the breath of God started blowing on the mud alongside one of those rivers where the catfish jumped so high that their whiskers sparkled in the sunlight. And God told the man who stood up in the mud to love his wife. And the man and the woman looked at each other and fell in love. And God smiled.

People of faith call it the Creation.

Once upon a time it was dark. So dark that you could not see anything. People loved the darkness and did things in it that would make you shiver in the light of day. And God was no longer smiling. So He told a man to build a great boat and put in the eagles and the elephants and the turtles and the snakes and the kittens and the puppies. And the man did.

It grew darker and there was thunder and lightning and rain. Rain so hard that it scraped out new mountain ranges and carved out new valleys and pushed that mud into piles that no one could ever find the bottom of. Then it grew quiet like it

always does after a rainstorm. One day the sun shone again. A dove flew out of the boat and landed in an olive tree. And the man in the boat looked out and saw God smiling a rainbow smile.

People of faith call it the Flood.

Once upon a time it was dark. So dark that you could not see anything. The people of God were slaves who built great pyramids and temples made of bricks. The people who owned those pyramids and those temples beat them with whips and took their babies away. There were no songs in the land. But God told one man that he would set God's people free. And the man went to the King and said, "God says, 'Let My people go.'" It was very dark the night when the King said "No." So God changed the King's mind with boils and gnats and blood and dark that was even darker. Finally, under the light of the first moon of spring, God's people fled into the darkness.

God's people stood on the shore of the sea and cried because they knew that in the darkness were chariots and horses and soldiers with swords and spears and javelins. Then, God's breath blew again and the sea opened up and God's people ran to the other side. The sea blew back over the chariots and horses and soldiers with swords and spears and javelins. It was quiet for a moment, and then people of God sang so loud that if you listen to the nighttime breeze in the spring you can still make out their song. God was smiling at their song.

People of faith call it the Exodus.

Once upon a time it was dark. So dark that you could not see anything. The people of God loved the darkness and did things in it that would make you shiver in the light of day. On the mountains, the people worshipped rocks and trees and bulls. The valleys were filled with the bodies of the poor, begging for bread. The rivers ran red with the blood of innocent victims of violence. The priests in the temples stole the people's money and their children and their homes.

God told one man that he would sprinkle clean water on the people and give them new hearts and put His own breath back inside them and cleanse them from the idols and the violence and the stealing and make them brand new again.

So God led that man outside his city to a great dark valley filled with bones. There were hip bones and knee bones. There were jaw bones and elbow bones. The front bones and back bones. They lay there in the valley, a big, white pile of bones, just as quiet as could be. While the man watched the breath of God blew on those old bones and they started to rattle. They started to rattle and shake and jump around. And the hip bones joined themselves up to the knee bones. The jaw bones jumped up above the elbow bones. The front bones and the back bones snapped together like they had always been together. And those

skeletons started to grow muscles. Those muscles started to grow veins. Those veins started to grow skin, as smooth as babies skin. And that skin, it just shone in the sun that hung over the valley that used to be filled with only bones.

The breath of God blew on that skin and little goosebumps popped up. Eyelids flew open and mouths began to laugh. And all those bodies jumped up and clapped their hands and danced the biggest dance you ever saw. God was smiling again.

People of faith call it the New Covenant.

Once upon a time it was dark. So dark that you could not see anything. And the people of God did something that still makes you shiver in the light of day. God had sent a man to them to tell them to love each other. They took the man who told them to love each other and nailed him to a wooden pole. The sun refused to shine and the moon turned as red as blood and the earth shook in disbelief.

In one of the hills, at the base of one of the mountains, there was a cave. They took the man who told them to love each other and put him in a cave. It grew darker than it had ever been. Darker than it was in the Valley of Death. Darker than it was on the Red Sea shore. Darker than the sky before the Flood. Darker than the Dark before the beginning of all Creation.

There were some women who, though they were afraid of the Dark, went out into it. They had spent two nights in the Darkness that they thought would never end, shivering at the evil they had seen. They never expected to see the sun again. But off they went to the cave, carrying sacks of spices and perfume and flowers. When they got to the cave, the earth shook again, and lightning struck around them, and there was a great, shining Light. In the center of the Light, an angel stood and told them that the man who told them to love each other was not in the cave. He was in the Light. When they turned around to leave He was standing there smiling. And they fell down and worshiped Him.

He had gone down into the Darkness and yanked it back into the Light. He had gone into the cave and turned it into a palace. He had taken all the captives of hell and opened to them the door of Heaven. He grabbed ahold of the Dark at the center of people's souls and blew God's own breath into it and there was Light.

The Sun came up. The catfish jumped and the whales whistled and the eagles soared and the bluebirds sang and the turtles stuck their heads out from their shells and the elephants blew loud songs on their trunks and the kittens chased their tails and the puppies barked at them all. There were rainbows in every drop of morning dew, and the rivers flowed with joy to the sea and the mountains clapped their hands in applause. The women sang the song of springtime and New Covenant and Freedom and Creation. All the Universe thudded with the message: "Alleluia! He is Risen!"

The women went and told the men, who did not believe that the Sun was shining.

Finally, after a while the men, too, came outside and stood in the Light.

People of faith call it Easter.