

Epworth Chapel on the Green
April 3, 2010
The Great Vigil of Easter
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

About 3,000 years ago, a man wrote a poem about love, love both human and divine. It goes like this:

*Rise up, my love, my fair one,
And come away.
For lo, the winter is past,
The rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear upon the earth;
The time of singing has come,
And the voice of the turtledove is heard in the land;
Rise up, my fair one,
And come away.* (Song of Solomon, 2:10-13)

With the possible exception of the girl of his dreams, the author of these words had no idea anyone would ever read them. He certainly had no idea that they would end up in Holy Scripture. But you can find them in your Old Testament, in the Song of Solomon, chapter two.

An obscure French theologian has a theory about these words from the Song of Solomon. He postulates that they form half of a conversation, similar to when you observe someone talking on the telephone. You hear half of the conversation, but you cannot hear what is being said on the other end.

When Jesus hung on the cross and cried, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” His words formed one half of a conversation. We are not told what God may have said or done in response.

Could it be possible, asks the French theologian, that God responded to Jesus with these words:

*Rise up, my love, my fair one,
And come away.
For lo, the winter is past,
The rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear upon the earth;
The time of singing has come,
And the voice of the turtledove is heard in the land;
Rise up, my fair one,
And come away.*

When I was a student at the University of Toronto, a professor of mine shared with me and some other students about two separate incidents in his life, both of which occurred within the span of a week.

In the first case, my professor and his wife attended a dramatic presentation of the Easter story at a large church on the West Coast. At the point in the story when it came time for the Crucifixion, Jesus hung on the cross. He cried out, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

There was silence. And then a choir of angels pierced the silence with these words:

*Rise up, my love, my fair one,
And come away.*

*For lo, the winter is past,
The rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear upon the earth;
The time of singing has come,
And the voice of the turtledove is heard in the land;
Rise up, my fair one,
And come away.*

Later that same week, my professor was in Boston for a workshop. His coworker was a doctor who served the only hospital for lepers in the United States. His doctor friend told him about an encounter he had just had with a woman under his care, a woman who had been at the hospital for 17 years. She was an illiterate woman from the deep south. She could not read or write a single word. Her name was Mary.

The doctor was in her room with his back to her. Suddenly, he noticed a glow of light, as if someone had turned on a lamp. He turned around to see the glow coming from Mary's diseased face.

"Mary, what happened?" he asked.

"God was here," she whispered.

"But I saw a light," the doctor replied.

"It was my Lord," Mary answered back. "He brought me a message."

"What did he say?" the doctor asked.

The old woman, diseased and near the point of death, replied:

*Rise up, my love, my fair one,
And come away.*

*For lo, the winter is past,
The rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear upon the earth;
The time of singing has come,
And the voice of the turtledove is heard in the land;
Rise up, my fair one,
And come away.*

Brothers and sisters, on this most holy night, we find ourselves plunged deep into the center of the mystery. We've heard the story of our faith, the story of the Creator who has loved us and called us to be his own.

He is the Deliverer who rescued us when we could not rescue ourselves. He is the One who took upon himself flesh and blood and bone and walked the streets of this planet, dying with the weight of our sins on his shoulders.

And the Apostle Paul says that when he died, we died with him, and through baptism we are raised with him to newness of life. We now share his reign, and we look forward to his coming in glory.

Paul says that the whole creation groans and longs for its redemption in Christ. Soon -- perhaps sooner than we think -- it will hear these words:

*Rise up, my love, my fair one,
And come away.
For lo, the winter is past,
The rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear upon the earth;
The time of singing has come,
And the voice of the turtledove is heard in the land;
Rise up, my fair one,
And come away.*

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.