

**Saturday, March 30, 2024**

**Great Vigil of Easter**

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1146179843227693>

*(Sermon begins at about 1:02:05)*

### **“New Beginnings”**

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

*The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!*

New beginnings are often exciting. At least, I think they are. Of course, I grew up in a military family in which new beginnings were a way of life. We had new beginnings in the form of moving to a new duty station anywhere from every three months to every three years. Each bringing with it a new home, a new school, new friends, new experiences, and new opportunities. In some ways, it was a chance to start life anew, with a clean slate.

Admittedly, not all new beginnings are exciting. Especially when necessitated by a less-than-positive event such as the loss of a loved one, the ending of a relationship, or a tragic life-changing situation. But even then, new beginnings can and often do have a silver lining. Sometimes, in the midst of what life can unexpectedly throw at us, a new beginning can, in the fullness of time, prove to be just what is needed for us to move on. Providing an opportunity for a new life and change of pace that can ultimately be beneficial in the healing process. A way of resetting so as to put the past behind us and to chart a new course into the future.

Easter is the religious equivalent. The chance for a new start in our lives of faith. Hopefully one that has been shaped and informed by the Lenten disciplines we engaged in through the preceding 40 days. An opportunity to follow the new path that was charted during the Lenten season, leading to renewed and strengthened relationship with God.

One of the ways we mark this time of new beginnings in our lives of faith is through our celebration of the Great Vigil of Easter. Every aspect of this unique worship service is carefully designed to focus on new beginnings, as a way of further preparing for the new beginning that is Easter.

We started with the lighting of the Paschal Fire, a symbolic representation and celebration of Christ's resurrection and his victory over sin and death. An act in which we move from the darkness of sin and death into the light that is the promise of forgiveness and new and eternal life through Christ. Basking in the glow of the light of Christ that represents the new beginning we all share in as a result of the sacred mystery we witness and commemorate this night.

We then followed the Paschal Candle, representing the light of Christ shining in the world, as we processed into the darkened church, revealing the glorious transformation from our Lenten simplicity into the splendors of new life represented by the church in all its glory. A symbolic journey into the new beginning this glorious Easter season affords.

Even as we settle into the church to celebrate the joys of the resurrection and what it means for us, we recognize that this event we celebrate, this new beginning, is the culmination of a long journey, of the long history, of God's people. A journey and a history that, from the beginning of time, slowly and systematically led to the events of Holy Week we just commemorated. That led to the spectacular event of the resurrection that we celebrate this night.

We heard scriptural accounts of key events in Salvation History. As we heard "the record of God's saving deeds in history, how he saved his people in ages past." A reminder of the fact that, from the beginning of creation, God has been leading his people—God has been leading us—to this moment.

We heard the story of Noah and the Flood. How humanity had become corrupt and deviated from God's vision for this world and for his people. How, through the Flood and through the righteousness of one man and his family, humanity and all creation was given an opportunity for a new beginning. In so doing, God established a covenant with Noah and with all of creation. Establishing the first covenantal relationship between God and his people. A new beginning in how God and the people would relate from that time onward.

We then heard the story of the deliverance at the Red Sea, as the Israelites, in slavery in Egypt, were liberated by God. The defining event for our Jewish forebears, commemorated to this day in the celebration of Passover, as they gained their freedom and began their 40-year journey to the Promised Land. A new beginning after centuries in which they had grown apart from God, they were reestablished as God's Chosen People. A time and a journey in which they would be re-formed as God's people and in which their relationship with God would be renewed and strengthened. A time and a journey that would shape the Jewish people, their culture, and their religion. Providing the foundation upon which our own religion and our lives of faith will develop.

We then heard the story of the Valley of Dry Bones. Not so much a historical event as an allegorical one, declaring the promise by God that his people, in exile in Babylon, would be liberated and returned to their homeland. A metaphor for new life being breathed into a people who, because of the Exile, had considered itself to be dead. As God proclaims, "I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil." The promise of a new beginning for the people, in which they would return to Israel, rebuild their homeland, and renew their relationship with God. But even more so, that God would put his spirit within his people, deepening and strengthening the relationship between God and his beloveds, in a new and more intimate way.

For us Christians, the imagery of the Valley of Dry Bones also foreshadows a new beginning in our relationship with God. Not only would he—did he—put a new spirit within us as a means of connecting on a deeper level. In the fullness of time God would make the connection with his people more tangible through the Incarnation. Through Emmanuel, God with us. Through the Word made flesh in the form of Jesus Christ the Son of God. And ultimately, as we celebrate this night, Jesus' resurrection, in which he triumphs over sin and death. And how through that

mysterious act, we are brought out of sin into righteousness and out of death into life. The ultimate in new beginnings.

This reality of forgiveness and new life is enacted through the sacrament of Baptism, in which our relationship with God and Christ are taken to the next level. Baptism is a new beginning for each of us in our lives of faith as we are adopted as God's children and made members of Christ's Body, the Church. In this sacrament, we share in Christ's death and resurrection, receiving forgiveness of our sins and new life in the Spirit. In the sacrament of Baptism, we take our place in the long line of the events of Salvation History we remembered this night. We take our place in the line of the faithful, who through these events and in their lives of faith, have borne witness to God's steadfast love for his people and his desire to be in relationship with us. The relationship that is epitomized in our celebration this night.

What we commemorate and celebrate this night is more than just the resurrection of our Lord. We celebrate that our God is a God of new beginnings. Continually finding new and exciting ways to be in relationship with his people. Finding new ways to move closer and closer to his people. Finding new ways to bring us closer and closer to him and to who he has created and calls us to be. Our response, as those who are reborn in water and the Spirit, is to continually seek new beginnings in our ongoing life of faith and service to our Risen Lord.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

*The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!*