

Easter Vigil
April 19, 2025
Isaiah 55:1-11
Luke 24:1-12

The Easter Vigil is one of the oldest services in the Christian Church, full of symbolism and meaning. Although there are variations in the service that have grown up in each community, some traditions must be kept intact. We always kindle a new light, and carry the light back into the sanctuary. We always hear a selection of historical readings from the Old Testament, one of which, per the rubrics in the Book of Common Prayer, must be the reading from Exodus, the deliverance at the Red Sea. We always either have baptisms or renew our baptismal covenant. We always ask God to use the Spirit to so stir up our hearts and minds that we are renewed in body and mind and can worship in sincerity and truth. And we always hear some portion of the resurrection story.

We talked about all these things at our Soup Suppers during Lent, playing our “Lenten Jeopardy” game as a fun way of learning or relearning about our Lenten and Holy Week traditions. But why do we do this? Why have these stories and readings and prayers continued in an unbroken chain for the better part of two thousand years, when other traditions have changed and fallen by the wayside?

We do these things to remind us who we are, and Whose we are. We kindle a new fire as a sign that Christ has risen and is returned among us, and we carry the light as a reminder that we are now charged with the mission of carrying the light into the world. We tell the stories so that we never forget our rich history, a history of rising and falling, of success and failure, of deserts and wildernesses and water and deliverance. In the midst of the resurrection, in the midst of our celebration that Christ is alive and the light and life of our Church is here among us once again, we remember that we need Lent and the desert as well as Easter joy, if we are to be mature Christians fit to do the work that God has given us to do. We need to remember that we must travel far, and on a long and wandering way, taking us places we don’t know and meeting people we don’t understand at first, if we are to have the skills and the Spirit to help all the peoples of the earth claim their inheritance as children of the promise made to Abraham.

We keep these traditions as a reminder that we are to constantly seek the Lord and do what God would have us do, turning away from what is not life-sustaining and instead doing our best to listen to God’s plans and carry them out for our sake and the sake of others. This is why we renew our Baptismal Covenant: to remember

that we are recommitting ourselves to the tasks that Christ left for us to do, that we freely choose to continue the Christian journey, choosing the difficulties as well as the joys of a life serving Christ and those whom Christ loves and asks us to take care of.

We use this night and these traditions to remember that we are the people of God, wonderfully created and then even more wonderfully restored, so that human nature will not live forever in the midst of sin, but will have the chance to grow into the dignity of body, mind, and spirit that God intended from the first. We remember that as a people of water and the Spirit, God goes before us and behind us, helping us in our time of need. We remember that when we stumble and fall, we are to be reconciled to God and to our neighbor... and we are to remember that everyone we meet is our neighbor, beloved of God. We remember that this is a most improbable – a miraculous – story, and that, if we truly follow our call, we look foolish in the eyes of the world, just as Abraham and Moses and Jesus looked foolish to their neighbors. We remember that our call is to show forth in our lives what we profess in our faith, despite looking that foolish. And we remember that we do all this because we are part of the sign by which God tells the world that this world is not all there is, and that our work is to help bring the kingdom here to earth so that all people, without exception, will know that they are beloved children of God. As Christians, we need to remember all these things, and we do so especially on this night, when we turn from darkness and despair to light and joy.

Yet we acknowledge, even in the midst of our Easter rejoicing, that our Christian life often takes place in the midst of confusion, fear, and misunderstanding. Notice that in our resurrection story tonight, the reading from Luke, the women are first perplexed, then terrified, when they find the tomb empty. And then, when they hear the news that Christ is risen, and they run back to tell the other disciples of this unbelievable, joyous miracle... most of the men do not believe what the women have to say. Can you imagine what it must have been like for those women, to have followed Jesus through his ministry, to have stood watch at the cross, to have been the first witnesses to his resurrection – and then to have been called liars by their friends? What a set of mixed emotions! And this, I think, is part of what we need to take away tonight, in the midst of our turning from crucifixion to resurrection: that we are in good company when we are frightened, or confused, or terrified, or stunned into disbelief by what happens in our Christian journey. No matter how we behave, no matter how we feel, somewhere there is or has been a disciple who has acted just as we do... and God has still enabled and equipped them to go out and spread the Good News. We must go and do likewise.

The Easter message, the message of light and joy and resurrection and gratitude, is firmly grounded in a messy and unpredictable life, full of deserts and confusion and fear and death. The wonderful part is that the resurrection triumphs over the mess and the unpredictability, leads us out of the desert and into the land flowing with milk and honey, so that we can “rejoice and be exceeding glad” that Christ is alive and that we are his siblings, children of God and heirs of the kingdom. Easter is the season of turning terror into celebration, and moving beyond the fear to a new life grounded in God, a life so full of rejoicing and hope that we cannot wait to share the news with those who have yet to hear, even if at first they can’t believe their ears. May we who have walked the Lenten path and come out into the Easter light continue to walk in the light, and may we carry the meaning of this night with us always.

Amen.