

The Life in the Light

Isaiah 65:17-25

1 Corinthians 15:19-26

Psalms 118:1-2, 14-24

Luke 24:1-12

Alleluia, The Lord is risen!.....

It is traditional for the Easter sunrise service in Episcopal liturgies to be, rather than a normal Eucharist like we are doing, an Easter Vigil. In the Jewish world, they understand the day to begin at nightfall, rather than dawn. The Easter Vigil, coming from the Jewish world of Jesus' experience, therefore, begins in the darkness and culminates in the full light of day.

The way the Easter Vigil begins is by kindling a fire outside in the darkness. After the fire is lit, the priest says "Dear friends in Christ: On this most holy night, in which our Lord Jesus passed over from death to life, the Church invites her members, dispersed throughout the world, to gather in vigil and prayer. For this is the Passover of the Lord, in which, by hearing his Word and celebrating his Sacraments, we share in his victory over death."

Many Christians are unfamiliar with the meaning behind the Jewish Passover or the Christian identification with what we call the Paschal Mystery. But Christianity comes from Jewish roots and the weightiness of our freedom from the power of sin and death originates with God's protection of the enslaved Hebrews. During the original Passover, the Jews placed the blood of a slain lamb on the doorposts of their houses to signal the Angel of Death to protect and pass over their homes as he sought the death of the firstborn of their Egyptian captors. When Jesus came, he became our Paschal Mystery because, through Christ, the Passover Lamb, our liberation and redemption have been won for us through his sacrifice. An enfleshed God, whose blood shields us from destruction, dying for the love of human beings; that will always be mysterious. Beginning the Easter Vigil under the cover of darkness makes the mystery that much more pronounced.

The service continues with the prayer “O God, through your Son you have bestowed upon your people the brightness of your light: Sanctify this new fire, and grant that in this Paschal feast we may so burn with heavenly desires, that with pure minds we may attain to the festival of everlasting light”.

Imagine standing together in the dark chill before dawn, feeling the firelight warm your soul, knowing the power to cut through the darkness belongs to God alone. Knowing it is God’s light shining on you and in you. Can you feel your heart begin to burn with heavenly desires? Can you feel the hunger build for attaining the festival of everlasting light?

We live in difficult and troubled times. This scene of the darkness beginning the Easter Vigil reminds me of a quote attributed to St. Brigid. In her monastic community at Kildare, there was a sacred fire the nuns tended which burned perpetually. If there has ever been an easy time in human history, hers was not it any more than is ours. She said “in times of darkness, tend your fire. It will give light until the morning”.

The women who went to the tomb on that first Easter Sunday had neglected their internal fires and forgotten the words Jesus told them. They shouldn’t have been surprised to find the tomb empty, but their grief and fear had overwhelmed them, causing them to forget his promises. Can you relate? I sure can. In the Easter Vigil service, the assembly, crowding together in the dark beside the fire, lights a taper from that newly kindled flame and uses it to light the paschal candle. If you’re unfamiliar, the paschal candle is the big one that we burn at baptisms, funerals, feast days, and all throughout the season of Easter. Once the paschal candle has been lit from the fire, the celebrant says loudly “The Light of Christ” and like at Christmas, everyone lights their own taper from the flame of the paschal candle, spreading light to the whole assembly.

Flames in hand, standing next to the paschal candle, a deacon will sing The Exultant, which begins: “Rejoice now, heavenly hosts and choirs of angels, and let your trumpets shout Salvation for the victory of our mighty King. Rejoice and sing now, all the round earth, bright with a glorious splendor, for darkness has been vanquished by our eternal King. Rejoice and be glad now, Mother Church, and let your holy courts, in radiant light, resound with the praises of your people.”

From there the service continues with readings that detail God's light revealed throughout the Biblical stories. They cover creation, the flood, Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, the crossing of the Red Sea, and end with the prophets heralding God's heart for healing the brokenness of the world. The service is meant to be a retelling of the story of our salvation. It includes a renewal of the Baptismal Covenant because we need to be reminded of the grace we found when we were sealed as Christ's own forever.

In today's gospel, when the women tell the disciples what they saw, they are largely ignored. No one else seemed to remember or believe what Jesus had pronounced just over a week earlier. Except for one person. Peter immediately rushes out the door, racing to the tomb. We don't know if Peter did, in fact remember, or if he was just being his normal impulsive self. I tend to think Peter was still living with the agony of the broken relationship between him and Jesus. I don't know about you, but I hate living with the feeling that I have hurt or damaged a relationship. Having that be the last thing that happened between Peter and his friend must have been excruciating. Hoping Jesus was alive, racing to see for himself, proves something of the desperation Peter felt to have that fellowship restored.

As the dawn comes and we enter The Eucharist, The Holy Mysteries, we recite our faith together and recall our joy in Communion with God and one another. We keep vigil. We remind ourselves and one another today, on this great feast day, the day proving God's power over death, our ultimate liberation from the power of the grave. Today it is easy to remember. The sweets, easter finery, lilies, bunnies, and pastel colors enfold us in joy. But tomorrow or next week, when we switch on the news, or open our phones, it may be more difficult to remember. The darkness may try to crowd away the light from our hearts and we may get discouraged. For our own sake and for the sake of the whole world, we must never stop keeping vigil, actively kindling the light of Christ within our hearts, and shining it on others so they too can be reminded that... Alleluia, The Lord is risen!.....

On this Easter morning, as we watch the sunrise and await its dawning brightness and warmth, let us remember the words of a second century bishop, St. Irenaeus, who said,

“As those who see light are in the light sharing its brilliance, so those who see God are in God sharing his glory, and that glory gives them life. To see God is to share in life.”

May we be a people who look for the light, kindling our fire in the light of Christ, having our hearts continually enlightened by his presence, and sharing the life of that light with the whole world.