

The Great Vigil of Easter
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
3 April 2021

Welcome to this celebration of new life. The Great Vigil of Easter is one of the most beautiful services of the entire Christian year. A celebration pregnant with symbolism and meaning. The service begins in darkness when a new fire is started outside of the church. From this new fire we lit a Paschal Candle never before used, which will be a reminder of this glorious evening for a full year. It will be a symbol of the resurrection of Christ which we celebrate today. Christ tonight breaks through the darkness of death and becomes for us the light of the world. Our Passover Lamb has been sacrificed for us and through his resurrection, the darkness of sin and death has been finally conquered.

Then, as brother Allen and I processed with the new Paschal candle, each of you lit your own candles from it, affirming that Christ has the power to break through our own personal darkness. He is the light of the world, but at a more personal level, he is the light that drives away the personal darkness of our sin, the darkness of our intolerance, the darkness of our racism, the darkness of our bigotry, the darkness of our injustice, and the darkness of our apathy. Christ is light and where he is there is no darkness.

After we lit our candles, our cantor, David, sang for us the Exultet, also known as the Song of Praise. In this song we affirmed that this is the night when God brought our fathers, the children of Israel, out of bondage in Egypt, and led them through the Red Sea on dry land. This is the night, when all who believe in Christ are delivered from the gloom of sin and are restored to grace and holiness of life. This is the night, when Christ broke the bonds of death and hell, and rose victorious from the grave. The song declares this night wonderful, because out of mercy and loving-kindness, God gave a Son to redeem a slave. This night is holy beyond our comprehension. On this night wickedness is put to flight, and sin is washed away. This night restores innocence to the fallen, and joy to those who mourn. This night casts out pride and hatred and brings peace and concord. This is a most holy night when earth and heaven are joined, and man is reconciled to God.

After this great rejoicing, we entered into the great narrative of God's salvation history, by reading the Biblical record of God's relationship with the nation of Israel and with his church. We read how God Creates out of love, God liberates his people from the darkness of slavery in Egypt out of love, and how God breathes new life into the dry bones of those in Babylon and those among us who feel spiritually dead. Each of these Old Testament readings point directly to Jesus of Nazareth and what he did for us today by rising from the dead. He has created new life, a life that will never end, a new Creation for those who believe in him. Christ has also welcomed us into a new community, a community of those forgiven by God, those restored to a proper relationship with God. Christ today breathes new life into each and every one of us and makes us new beings.

The dry bones of our brokenness are made alive with God's Holy Spirit today as Christ molds us into new creatures by the power of his resurrection.

Then, after those powerful readings, we filled the church with sound and radiance as we turned all the lights on and lit all our Altar Candles. This gesture started our first Eucharist of Easter. In a few minutes Christ will invite all of us to come and eat of his body and blood and thus be nurtured, strengthened, and equipped for mission. Through the Eucharistic Prayer we will give all glory to our God, because of his tender mercy he created heaven and earth, and made us in his image. By his great mercy he gave his only Son Jesus Christ to take our nature, to suffer death on the cross for our redemption and to make a full and perfect sacrifice for the whole world. We then we will celebrate the perpetual memory of his death and sacrifice, by sharing together in his body and blood.

Within the context of the First Eucharist of Easter we will celebrate this new birth through the baptism of Lane Johanna Cooper, the soon to be the newest member of Christ's one, true church. And you will notice that although we are only baptizing one child today, all our prayers will be in the plural. This has a deep theological meaning. Lane will join hundreds, if not thousands, of brothers and sisters being baptized tonight in churches all around the world. And as we listen to the covenant vows her parents and godparents will make, we also will be given the opportunity to renew our own baptismal vows. We will reaffirm our renunciation of evil and will renew our commitment to Jesus Christ. We will promise to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers. We will promise to resist evil, and, whenever we fall into sin, repent, and return to the Lord. We will promise to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ and to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves. Finally, we will pledge to strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being.

This is what it means to be resurrected people. It means that we will pursue a relationship with God. It means that we will resist evil, treat others with dignity, and strive to live in justice and peace. Can you imagine a world where all strive for justice and peace? Can you imagine a world where all people respect the dignity of every human being regardless of gender identity, status, nationality, marital status, or life choices? Can you imagine a world where the only pre-condition to treat others with utmost respect and compassion is the fact that they are created by God in his image? A world where we love others not because we agree with them, not because they are part of our clubs and churches, not because they share our history or culture, and not because loving them will improve our social standing? This is in fact the world that Christ calls us today to create.

The sad truth is that many around the world reject Christ not because they are unwilling to believe that he is the truth, but because of the lifestyle and behaviors of those who profess themselves to be his followers. If we were to live as Christ calls us today to live, our churches would be filled, our cities would prosper in peace, and our world would be free of the darkness of genocide, war, and famine. Today Christ points to a new way of

being. Today he challenges our complacency, our apathy, our arrogance, and our inhumanity. Today, Christ calls us to become a new creation.

This has been a night for alleluias, for songs of joy, and new beginnings. But the whole purpose for this evening is not found here within this church, but rather, it is found out there in our world. Today, Christ gives his light that we might be a light to the world. Today, God gives us his Son, that we might share his Son with the world. Today, Christ feeds us with his Body and Blood, that we might go into the world to love and serve as redeemed, forgiven, and restored people.

I pray tonight that you will allow God to use a wrecking ball to tear down any walls of separation between you and him. I know that many of you come and visit us once or twice a year and we are very grateful that you do. But I know why you come so sporadically. There are walls that separate you from a relationship with God. I know that some of those walls have been built by priests and I apologize on their behalf. I know some of these walls have been built by the behavior of other Christians and I apologize on their behalf. Today I pray that you will give God permission to build you into a new creation. Today I pray that you will allow Christ to transform your life that you may find the true joy of those who love him and follow him. I pray today that you will follow him wherever he might lead you. Amen!