

The Rev. George Arceneaux, Curate  
Sermon for The Great Vigil of Easter, April 3, 2021  
Church of the Ascension, Chicago, IL  
Genesis 1:1-2:2, 7:1-5, 11-18, 8:6-18, 9:8-13; Exodus 14:10–15:1;  
Ezekiel 37:1-14; Zephaniah 3:12-20

I greet you warmly tonight as we worship together in this the most central of all Christian liturgies. The significance of this service to the Christian life cannot be overstated, though I admit I did not begin to recognize its significance until only a couple years ago. And I hope in sharing some of my journey towards understanding tonight may provoke something in you. I was provoked to appreciation of the Easter Vigil, as I said, two years ago, by the former Bishop of Chicago, the right rev. Jeffrey Lee, who met with the clergy of Chicago in the midst of holy week. At this meeting, Bishop Lee hoped to emphasize for the clergy of Chicago the importance Holy Week and more specifically the Easter Vigil ... and he did so by framing it in the context of baptism and the paschal mystery.

The paschal mystery he summed up in that proclamation we so often say, Christ has died, Christ is risen, and that Christ will come again. This is the mystery we encounter each Sunday as we celebrate the memorial of our redemption but it is so acutely conveyed this week. As we anticipate the risen Christ tonight, we spend much of the week chewing on that grievous reality that Christ has died. The body of Christ is placed in the altar of repose and that altar stripped, the lights of the church dimmed to convey that the light of the world had gone out. We do what we can through the rituals and rites handed down to us from ages past to honor that the absence of God in Christ who died on the cross was not some cheap parlor trick or sleight of hand from the almighty, but was real death. As real as any loss you or I have endured, made real through Christ's fear in the garden and despair as he cried "my God my God why have you forsaken me?"

That we take as much liturgical time as we do to honor this darkness' significance makes the resurrection of Christ, that element of life reborn in the paschal mystery, all the more potent.

In the early days of the Church, it was this same darkness in which ancient adherents of the faith would meet, with the vigil serving as the culminating liturgy for initiating newly baptized Christians. During Lent, aspirants to Holy Baptism studied and discerned towards entering the Christian community. They prepared themselves to receive baptism by water and the Holy Spirit so they too could become members of the holy priesthood in the body of Christ.

The reason the Easter Vigil was elected as the service most appropriate for baptism is I think best summed up in what Father Patrick will speak in just a moment after I finish preaching, just before we recite our baptismal vows, before when a baptism would traditionally occur. Father Patrick will address us saying, "through the paschal mystery, dear friends, we are buried with Christ by Baptism into his death, and raised with him to newness of life."

This is why I remember the history lesson Bishop Lee gave that day, why we most acutely remember our baptism this evening, because through baptism and the paschal mystery we are joined Christ's death and resurrection, because when the church from darkness is illuminated and the priest proclaims Christ is risen and we all responds "The Lord is risen indeed" it is not simply because we remember some distant historical event but instead that the miracle of the

resurrection, the work of God writ from the beginning of creation was not simply completed in the past but is completed again here and today because he is risen in the baptized, in me and in you.

Tonight we honor that we are joined in Christ's resurrection, in his story ... in God's. We are invited to recognize our place in the narrative of our faith which has led to Christ's resurrection and the hope of our own.

The grand narrative of creation, of God's people persecuted and liberated and of God made manifest, dead and alive again, is retold year after year because not only is it God's narrative; it is yours as well.

I put a quotation in here to calm myself down, so in service to seeing our stories in Christ's, I quote former archbishop Rowan Williams who writes that in our glimpse of the resurrected Christ, "things become possible. We can confront today's business with new thoughts and feelings, reflect on our suffering and our failures with some degree of hope - not with a nice and easy message of consolation but with the knowledge that there is a depth of the world's reality and out of that comes the light which will somehow connect, around and in Jesus Christ, all the complex, painful, shapeless experience of human beings."

The hard business of our individual lives are embraced by God through Christ's death and resurrection, and we relish that reality in the easter vigil. Our shames and disappointments. Our misdeeds and regrets. These are born by Christ. And if Bishop Lee and a host of adherent Christians past are to be trusted and believed, our lives are borne Christ who is risen in one another.

We have heard the story of God through creation and history and will hear again of Christ's victory over sin and death. And in a moment, we'll recite our baptismal promises. When we do, I invite you to boldly claim your place in that narrative of faith which we have received. Bring all of whom you are to bear, your gifts and wounds, your failures and joys as you remember that through baptism you are joined in that paschal mystery. Remember that in you, Christ is risen indeed.