

The Great Vigil of Easter – Holy Saturday, April 4th 1998 at 7:30 pm

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University Lutheran Chapel, 1101 University Ave SE, Minneapolis, MN
THE GREAT VIGIL OF EASTER

"Almighty and most merciful God, pour out on us your abundant blessing that all who in true faith share this night in joyful celebration of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead may be filled with your heavenly benediction. Once we were in darkness, but now we are in the Light, even Jesus Christ, our Lord."

One of the richest services of the Christian Year is the Great Vigil of Easter. Full of biblical imagery centering around light/darkness, creation/new creation, death/life, and sin/redemption, the Easter Vigil proclaims the victory of our Passover Lamb over sin, death, and hell, pointing us to Holy Baptism as the means by which we are made partakers of His resurrection.

The Vigil of Easter (see Lutheran Worship Agenda, p.73, ff.) is divided into four services: (1) The Service of Light; (2) The Service of Readings; (3) The Service of Holy Baptism; and (4) The Service of Holy Communion.

The Vigil begins with the Service of Light as the congregation gathers outside the nave in darkness. After the Invocation, the pastor says, "Beloved in the Lord, on this most holy night, in which our Lord Jesus passed over from death to life, we are gathered here in vigil and prayer. This is the Passover of the Lord in which, by hearing his Word and celebrating his sacraments, we share in his victory over death." Central to the Service of Light is the paschal candle. The paschal candle symbolizes Jesus Christ who is the Light of the world (John 8:12). The first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, Alpha and Omega, are inscribed on the candle, reminding us that Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today, and forever. Five wax nails are embedded into the candle signifying the wounds of the Savior. The paschal candle is lighted as the pastor says, "May the light of Christ, who is risen in glory from the dead, scatter all the darkness of our hearts and minds."

On Good Friday the congregation leaves the church in darkness. Now on Easter Eve the congregation is led by the paschal candle into the darkened church. Worshipers carry small candles lighted from the paschal candle. Pausing three times and lifting the paschal candle, the deacon chants: "The light of Christ" and the congregation responds in thanksgiving: "Thanks be to God." The paschal candle is placed in a stand by the lectern where it will remain until Ascension Day. In honor of the Lord's resurrection, the paschal candle is lighted for all the services of Easter. After the Divine Service on Ascension Day, the paschal candle is placed by the baptismal font as reminder that Risen Christ washes away our sin and gives us His Holy Spirit in this sacrament. As token of the "life and immortality to light" (II Timothy 1:10) won by the Savior who abolished death, the paschal candle is placed by the casket at funerals.

As the Easter Proclamation (Exultet) is sung, the candles in the chancel and the sanctuary are lighted with a flame from the paschal candle. The Easter Proclamation calls on angel choirs to unite with all of creation in acclaiming the triumph of our King and Savior. The ancient darkness of sin is banished and the Bride of Christ is adorned with the radiant splendor of the Sun of Righteousness (Mal. 4:2). The Thanksgiving declares the praises of the Lord who has called us out of darkness into His light, recalling the deliverance at the Red Sea as a picture of the deliverance which we are given by the death and resurrection of the Paschal Lamb. Redemption and reconciliation with God echo throughout the Thanksgiving. In holy

awe the church sings of that majestic mercy which causes God "to redeem a slave" by giving His only Son. The broken seal of the tomb ushers us into the new creation as God has brought light out of darkness. The Morning Star (see Rev. 22:16) has arisen and the beams of His favor gives light to all creation.

The second service of the Vigil is the Service of Readings. The pastor introduces this service with these words, "In this most holy night our Savior, Christ, the Lord, broke the power of death and by his resurrection brought life and salvation to all creation. Let us praise the Lord, for he truly keeps his Word. The sun of righteousness has dawned upon us who have sat in darkness and in the shadow of death." Readings from the Old Testament follow, beginning with the account of creation (Genesis 1:1-2:2) and including the record of Israel's deliverance at the Red Sea (Exodus 14:10-15:1). Other Old Testament readings may include the story of the flood (Genesis 7:1-5, 11-18, 8:6-18; 9:8-13), Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22:1-18), the offer of free salvation to all (Isaiah 55:1-11), the promise of a new heart and new spirit (Ezekiel 36:24-28), Job's confession of the resurrection of the flesh (Job 19:20-27), and the gathering of God's redeemed in the new Zion (Zephaniah 3:12-20). Each of these Old Testament readings deepen in us some aspect or implication of the Lord's resurrection. There is a time for silence after each reading, then a collect is prayed asking God to enliven us in the victory of the resurrection, giving us a full and hearty trust in the promises which He made to us in Holy Baptism. Stanzas of appropriate Easter hymns may be sung after each collect. The Service of the Readings concludes with the Benedicite Omnia Opera (Canticle 9 in Lutheran Worship) as this hymn calls on all of creation to praise the Redeemer who was crucified and is now alive forevermore.

Next comes the Service of Baptism. A reading from Romans 6:3-11 draws out the connection between Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection and Holy Baptism. We were buried with Him in Baptism and just as the Lord was raised from the dead so we too will live by virtue of His resurrection. The congregation confesses this blessing of Holy Baptism by singing, "All Who Believe and are Baptized" (225 LW). If there are candidates for Holy Baptism, the service continues with the baptismal liturgy. If not, the service continues with the renunciation of satan, the confession of the baptismal creed, the Apostles' Creed, and the remembrance of our Baptism.

As this is a vigil liturgy, that is, a service of waiting and anticipation, the actual celebration of the Service of Holy Communion is best reserved for the Festival Service on Easter morning. If the Holy Communion is not celebrated as part of the Easter Vigil, the liturgy concludes with the Easter Gospel (St. Mark 16:1-8), a collect which implore God, "who made this most holy night to shine with the glory of the resurrection of the Lord" to preserve in His people "the spirit of adoption, that made alive in body and soul," they may serve Him purely, the Benedicamus, and the Blessing.

The Easter Vigil tutors us in faith in God's promises, strengthens us in the knowledge of the forgiveness of sins and the victory of the Lord's resurrection. The accent is on what God has done for us in Christ Jesus: "O God, that to redeem a slave you gave your Son." The Great Vigil of Easter echoes the joyous proclamation that the Crucified Savior is risen from the grave while pointing us to Baptism: "Thus we see what a great and excellent thing Baptism is which snatches us from the jaws of the devil and makes God our own, overcomes and takes away sin and daily strengthens the new man, always remains until we pass from this present misery to eternal glory" (Large Catechism IV:83, Tappert, p.446).

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!
