



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### The Great Vigil of Easter

#### In the Darkness

[RCL] Exodus 14:10-31; 15:20-21; Psalm 114; Romans 6:3-11; Matthew 28:1-10

The Easter Vigil is a dramatic service.

It is the first service of Easter Day. In this holy night, before the lilies, the brunches, and the flowered crosses of the morning, we begin quietly, in near darkness.

With the scratching of a match or flint against steel, we ignite the new fire, and from that fire, the Paschal Candle is lighted. The Paschal Candle, drawing our attention to the light of Christ, is the focal point as we share aloud the stories of how, over and over, God creates order out of chaos, liberation out of oppression, hope out of despair, and life out of death.

These stories culminate in the one that finds Mary Magdalene and Mary diligently approaching the tomb, expecting to find no life, only a continuation of their grief in an oppressive and chaotic world.

Instead, something has happened in the darkness. In the darkness of the tomb, something wonderful, something hardly believable, something earth-shattering, has happened. Jesus is no longer there; he has been raised and is on his way to Galilee.

While so much of our focus is on the light, let us not forget where it all began.

As Barbara Brown Taylor writes in *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, “As many years as I have been listening to Easter sermons, I have never heard anyone talk about that part. Resurrection is always announced with Easter lilies, the sound of trumpets, bright streaming light. But it did not happen that way. If it happened in a cave, it happened in complete silence, in absolute darkness, with the smell of damp stone and dug earth in the air.... new life starts in the dark. Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark.”

As Christians, we are prone to talking about dark versus light—more specifically, to see the light as a conqueror of the dark. But to pit the two against each other is to miss the ways God is present and working in both.

We tend to think of darkness only as periods of despair, hopelessness, or confusion—times when God feels far away or at best unknowable. In darkness, we hit our shins on the coffee table; in the darkness, we don't know what might jump out to get us.

But there is also goodness in darkness. It is the condition necessary for restorative slumber. In the dark and quiet, we can rest and replenish. In the dark and quiet of the earth, bulbs wait quietly for warmer temperatures. In the dark and quiet, seeds germinate before pushing green shoots up above the soil, ready for the sun.

God works marvelous wonders amidst darkness. As the familiar words of Psalm 139 remind us, “Darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day; darkness and light to you are both alike. For you yourself created my inmost parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb.”

God creates in the darkness—in the soil, in the womb, in the cave.

Though periods of grief, hopelessness, and confusion might seem like the moments God is the farthest away, if we observe closely, we can see signs that God is quietly present, sowing seeds, working wonders, and inviting us into growth and new life.

Our reading from Exodus tells of the fear and disarray of the Israelites trying to flee generations of enslavement in Egypt, and though they are pursued by Pharaoh's army, God creates a way, a path forward into new life.

Our passage from Paul's letter to the Romans proclaims that though Christ was crucified and died, his resurrection means that death no longer has dominion over him. What could have been the end of the story is only the beginning. In Christ, “we too might walk in newness of life.”

And in the Gospel from Matthew, Mary Magdalene and Mary meet an angel from the Lord who tells them the good news and invites them to go and share it too. And so, “they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.” It is this fear *and* great joy that can be instructive for us modern-day followers of Christ—yes, there is much to fear in this world. The news every day reminds us of the many dangers around us—the persistent hatred, apathy, and despair that we cannot afford to ignore. And yet, even with this fear, there is great joy. We can hold great joy because we know that God is present, working wonders and inviting us into new life.

The joy of Easter is no shallow joy. It is a joy grounded in the depth of knowing that God is with us and always opening a path to walk in newness of life—with us in the dark and quiet, with us in the unknown, and with us in the bright light of day.

And so, on this holy night that shines with the glory of the Resurrection, let us give thanks in the dark and quiet, amidst the light and fanfare, and in all the moments in between, knowing that God is steadily present, creating, inviting, and restoring. In this service of the Easter Vigil, we have been witnesses to the fullness of that truth, and soon it will be time to go forth from here, sharing what we have seen. May we follow in the footsteps of Mary Magdalene and Mary and tell the good news, with our fears cushioned by great joy in the knowledge of the wonders God works.

Alleluia. Christ is Risen. The Lord is Risen indeed. Alleluia!

Amen.

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