

“The Night of all Nights” Christ’s resurrection is the keystone of our faith

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“Christ is risen, yes He is risen indeed! Alleluia!” From the earliest days of the Church, this acclamation has been proclaimed, an acclamation of joy, amazement, and hope. Jesus, who died a bloody, brutal death on Good Friday, who seemed to have been taken from his followers, never to be seen again, has returned. But he has not just returned as he was, with a body that could and would die once again. No, Jesus has come back to us in glory, risen in the divine life of God, and now he would never die again. As Pope Francis has said, “He does not simply return to life, rather he is life itself!”

In the ancient Church, Christians gathered on this night just as we have, to hold the vigil of the Resurrection. Through the night, they listened to readings from Scripture, the entire story of salvation. They sang the psalms of deliverance, and they prayed. Just as the holy women came to the tomb while the world was still dark and the first rays of dawn were not yet showing, the faithful held vigil through the night.

Those early Christians lit candles just as we have tonight, to celebrate the brilliant light that emerged from the tomb while the world was dark and asleep. When all had seemed dark and hopeless, Jesus burst forth from the tomb alive once again, a light that pierces the darkness, a light that illuminates and makes all things new, a living light that even the sunrise could not rival. Just like those early Christians of many centuries ago, we tonight celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus, the One who conquered sin and death, the One who gave hope to a fallen and sinful world.

A highpoint of the Easter Vigil has always been the celebration of baptism - the Easter sacrament. The catechumens were led in, they made their profession of faith, and they were immersed in the waters of baptism. Just as Israel passed through the waters of the Red Sea and came through to a new life, Jesus went down to death and rose victorious to the life of glory. Now we share in that dying and rising through baptism, by going down into the waters and dying to our old lives and then rising into the new and eternal life of the Risen Christ. Baptism truly incorporates us into the death and resurrection of Jesus; we become one with him in the great Paschal Mystery of his passion, death, and resurrection.

How blessed we are to continue this ancient tradition of baptism tonight. In the glow of resurrection light, we will celebrate the baptism of one who will thus become part of our family of faith, which is the Church. But we celebrate our own baptisms too. All here who have been baptized will be invited to renew the baptismal promises that we once made. And as we renew

those promises, let us remember that Christ has died as we must, but he is now Risen, and we too shall rise if we remain faithful to him.

Others among us, who are already baptized, will also be welcomed into the fullness of the Church's faith this night. Through their profession of faith and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Confirmation, these candidates will be joined to us as well, new members of the Church, new brothers and sisters in faith. We rejoice with them and promise them our prayers and our love. And finally, all of us together will participate in another Easter sacrament - the Holy Eucharist. For in the Eucharist we receive "a pledge of future glory." In the Eucharist we receive Christ who died and is risen. We receive the Christ who promised: "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has life eternal, and I will raise him up on the last day."

If we could sum up our entire faith in one celebration, this Easter Vigil would be it. It is called the "Night of all nights," the "Mother of all holy vigils." This celebration of Christ's resurrection is the keystone of our faith, and somehow it should change us and transform us. The celebration of Easter is not only a time to think again about the empty tomb and the message of the angels. It isn't only a recalling of the surprised women or the dumbfounded disciples. It is also a time to think of our own relationship with our risen Lord, who shares his very life with us. If the world sometimes seems hopeless and without meaning, then the knowledge of our Lord's resurrection should fill us with hope and vigor. If earthly life can seem at times futile and aimless, then through the resurrection we now know where we are going and what our lives must be about. On this vigil of Easter, I can be more certain than ever that sin cannot defeat me because Christ has defeated sin. And on this holy night, I can be more convinced than ever that death will not have the last word, because Christ has conquered death.

Easter is not only a story to be told, an account of a miracle that happened a very long time ago. It is the event that has determined the meaning of each of our lives, indeed the meaning of all history. If we grasp this, we too can proclaim the Easter greeting with unbridled joy: "The Lord has risen, yes, he is risen indeed," and we are now risen with him. On this night of all nights, we can say with St. Augustine, "We are a resurrection people, and Alleluia is our song."