

Sermon for April 16, 2022 by The Rev. Lydia Gajdel
Easter Vigil Year C
St. Paul and the Redeemer Episcopal Church – Chicago, Illinois

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Mother of us all.

This is the night. The night when the waters parted, and the dry land appeared in its place. The night when flesh and breath brought life to the dry bones of the valley. The night when Christ broke the bonds of death and rose victorious from the grave.

This is the night.

On this night we gather. Surrounding ourselves with the stories and souls that have brought us to this moment. We envelope ourselves with the symbols of our faith – the new light of Christ, the waters of baptism, the spiritual food and drink of this God’s very table. We immerse ourselves in who we say we are as beloved and broken creatures made in God’s own image. On this night when we celebrate the passing of Christ from death into new life, we take a step back and remind ourselves how we got here. The symbols and narratives that have sculpted us into the community of faith that gathers right here. Right now. In this very place.

We are a people of tradition, a people of ritual, a people of hope found through the voices of those who have come before us. Guiding us in the way of faith. Which is why we begin this most sacred night recounting the experiences of God alive in the world as we prepare for God’s ultimate act of love as fully human and fully divine. We hear of the miracle of creation - God manifesting the complexity of this life in six days of loving, intentional labor. The prophets recount for us the glory of God’s love that is to come. And brittle, dry bones spring to life. We come to be present with the moments of God showing up, acting in the world as it is as God creates the world as it should and will be.

But we do not gather tonight as a memory exercise. We do not only come to remember what was. We gather tonight to present ourselves, our souls and bodies, to the lived experience of God. To come face to face with God’s continued presence in our lives and encounter the resurrected Christ right here. Right now. In this very place. Because we as Christians believe not just in scripture and tradition that grounds us in the complexity of our God. We believe we are a part of it. That our God has breath and life which pulses through our bodies.

Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel, Jewish scholar, philosopher, and civil rights activist reminds us of this, saying, “There are no final proofs of the existence of God, Father and creator of all. There are only witnesses.”

We gather tonight as witnesses to a loving, vibrant God. A God at work in us through the scriptures and traditions of old and the intricacies of this very moment. As we celebrate this night, we take our place among the great cloud of witnesses to the possibility and power of our God.

But that's the thing about the resurrection. We don't celebrate Easter because the resurrection happened. We celebrate Easter because it continues to happen. Because resurrection and our salvation are not a thing that happened long ago in a faraway place. It is something in which we are continuously implicated. Easter is not a thing we celebrate because it is a part of the church. It is a thing we celebrate because it is a part of us. This is our story.

As challenging and complex and beautiful and lifegiving as it is. We are wrapped up with God in every fiber of this story that tells us who we are, where we come from, and where we are going. This story of ours includes the love of being in relationship with God's people, the heartbreak and trauma of death, the wonderment of new life.

This is who we are.

The old light goes out and the new light guides our way into the unknown. We sink down into the running waters and emerge washed clean. We die over and over and over again and are continuously resurrected into new life. This story of our God that we come to celebrate on this night is not just the story of our salvation and our relationship with God. It is also the story of how we exist. Who we are. The cycle of our lives created in the image and likeness of our all-knowing, all-loving God. Tonight we gather to face the reality that something must die for the glorious joy of a new thing to be raised up and we stand in the midst of our God as it happens. Right here. Right now. In this very place. We gather as witnesses to the resurrection and to our own salvation.

This is the night. The night when we are reminded of the complexity of our humanity and God's love for us through it all. The night when we encounter the rhythms of death and life that punctuate our reality that are required in order to come face to face with the glory of resurrection. The night when we rejoice in the mystery of our salvation. This is the night that welcomes in the morning that is promised. Because, by faith, somehow morning always comes.

And so this is a night to rejoice. For we have a God who walks with us in all of the complexity of this our story, the heartache and the beauty, and never leaves our side. A God who builds something out of nothing within our world and within each of us. We gather tonight to experience ourselves and one another as children of God and rejoice in that fact with everything we are and everything God is creating in us to be. In the beautiful words of Rabbi Heschel,

“First we praise, then we believe. We begin with a sense of wonder and arrive at radical amazement. The first response is reverence and awe, openness to the mystery that surrounds, and we are led to be overwhelmed by the glory. God is not a concept produced by deliberation. God is an outcry wrung from heart and mind; God is never an explanation, it is always a challenge. It can only be uttered in astonishment.”

On this night, we gather together in astonishment of what our God is capable of. To rejoice in the mystical presence of our God. And to stand in wonderment of the possibility before us, laid out through the resurrection. This is the night that we tell our story and rejoice in our salvation.

Amen.