

Epworth Chapel on the Green
April 20, 2019
Easter Vigil
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We began on Thursday evening with Moses instructing the children of Israel to prepare for the *Passover*, the saving event that inaugurated their freedom from Egyptian slavery and sealed their family bond in Covenant with God.

The Passover was to be celebrated *perpetually*, because there had to be some way for God's saving actions to become communicable to people who were not part of the original event.

Thursday's Gospel lesson found us in the upper room, where Jesus celebrated the Passover of the Old Covenant one last time with his disciples. But he did so in order to institute the *New Covenant*, with *himself* as the new Passover Lamb.

Jesus' sacrificial offering of himself for the sins of the whole world began, then, *not* on Friday when he was nailed to the Cross, *but* in the upper room on Thursday when he departed the ritual of the Old Covenant Passover in order to institute the *New Covenant* Passover, where he said: "This bread is my body, broken for you; this cup which is poured out for you is the *new covenant* in my blood."

Then Jesus departed the Old covenant script even further, and left the upper room with his disciples without drinking the fourth cup of wine that typically

consummated the Passover celebration. As I tried to show last night, when Jesus took the wine offered to him on the Cross, he was able to say, “It is finished.” And what was finished was not merely his death on the Cross, but the *New Covenant Passover* which he instituted the night before in the upper room, with *himself* as the Passover Lamb.

If what Jesus shared with his disciples in the upper room on Thursday night was just a meal, then his death on the Cross on Friday was merely a Roman execution. **But if Jesus’ institution of the Eucharist on Thursday was nothing less than the sacrifice of the New Covenant Passover, then what was instituted on Thursday was fully consummated on Friday, where that gruesome Roman execution became the perfect, once-for-all sacrifice for the sins of the whole world.**

But this is not the end of the story. There is so much more. For instance, we must ask: Where and how does Jesus’ resurrection fit into all of this?

I would submit to you that the Eucharist that Jesus instituted on Thursday not only explains the mystery of his suffering on *Friday*; it also clarifies the importance of his resurrection on Easter *Sunday*.

How? Because if the Eucharist transformed Jesus’ suffering from an execution into a holy sacrifice, then Jesus’ resurrection is what transforms that *sacrifice* into a *sacrament* that we now DO in remembrance of him. **The**

resurrection is what makes Jesus' body -- the body of the New Covenant

Passover Lamb -- *communicable to us*. The Eucharist is the risen Lord, who comes to us under the appearance of bread and wine. His resurrection transforms his *sacrifice* into a *sacrament*.

Return with me to Thursday night where Jesus is in the upper room with his disciples. Let us notice again what he says and does. He takes the chalice and says, "This cup is the blood of the New Covenant, poured out for many for the remission of sins. Do this in remembrance of me."

The words Jesus uses here for "New Covenant" are *kaine diatheikei*. They are equally translated as "New Covenant" or "New Testament." Jesus is saying: "This is the blood of the New Testament. Do this in remembrance of me."

Notice what Jesus does *not* say here. He does not say: "*Write* this in remembrance of me." He does not say, "*Read* this in remembrance of me." He says: "*Do* this."

Do what? The *New Testament*. And what is the New Testament? The New Testament is the *Eucharist*.

Jesus never said, "Write this in remembrance of me." And in fact over half of the disciples in the upper room never contributed a single book to the collection of the 27 books that we now call the New Testament. But it wasn't because they

were lazy or disobedient. It was because Jesus did not say, “Write this in remembrance of me.” He said: “*Do* this.”

And that’s what they did. The early church and the apostles went out preaching and baptizing and celebrating the *New Testament* of the Eucharist for years.

But this is where the problem of language and the use of words hinders us, because when we think of the term “New Testament,” we automatically think of the collection of books, the *documents* in the second portion of our Bibles.

But in fact, the writings we know as the “New Testament” were not begun until at least 15-20 years after Jesus’ resurrection. And they were not completed until the end of the first century. And these documents – documents that were being read in the Church’s Sunday liturgy -- were not referred to as the “New Testament” *until the second half of the second century!*

And what happened at the end of the second century to cause these documents to be called the “New Testament?” They were called such because of their liturgical closeness to what *had* been called the “New Testament” since the first half of the first century. And what was that? *The Eucharist that Jesus himself called the New Testament.*

Jesus never used the word *diatheikei* (“covenant” or “testament”) any other time except when he instituted the Eucharist. When he did, he said, “This is the blood of the New Testament – *do this in remembrance of me.*”

What this means is that *The New Testament was a sacrament long before it was a document – according to the document!*

Now, if the Old Covenant Passover was not complete until the flesh of the sacrificial lamb was eaten, *and if* Jesus is the New Covenant Passover Lamb, *and if* the New Covenant is greater than the Old Covenant because it fulfills it, then somehow the flesh of the New Covenant Passover Lamb has to be eaten in order for the New Covenant Passover to be complete, right?

The question is: How? How do we feed on Jesus the New Passover Lamb?

And the answer is the **sacrament** that Jesus instituted, the sacrament of the New Testament.

It is the sacrament that makes Jesus’ resurrected body – the glorified body of the New Passover Lamb – communicable to us.

Jesus, our Great High Priest, stands now in heaven, and through the sacrament his perfect, once-for-all sacrifice is made eternally present to us.

And that is why, on this Holy Saturday, it is not enough for us to say: *Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us.* We must also say: *Therefore let us keep the*

feast. We must “do” the sacrament that *is* the New Testament – in accordance with the New Testament!

He is risen! Thanks be to God!

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.