

Epworth Chapel on the Green
April 7, 2012
Easter Vigil
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

This service, the Easter Vigil, is the foundation of Christian worship, and the pinnacle of the liturgical year. The origins of this service go back to the resurrection itself, and the service in its final form was completed probably by the end of the second or third century.

In the early church, believers gathered on this night and held vigil late into the night and through the night into the early hours of the morning. A couple of reasons prompted this.

First, those who were preparing to be baptized on Easter Sunday had come through a long process of training (catechesis) and instruction. This instruction lasted upwards of two years, but took on intense focus during the period of Lent. (We should note that in the early church, one was not allowed to receive the Eucharist until one had been properly catechized and baptized.)

The people gathered with the catechumens, then, to hold vigil, to hear from the Scriptures God's mighty acts of salvation, and to pray. Later, a tradition arose which held that Christ would return during this time of vigil, which heightened the intensity of its atmosphere.

The vigil, then, was when the catechumens culminated their season of preparation and prayer as they anticipated their baptism into the church and readied themselves to receive their first Eucharist.

The baptism of the catechumens was an important part of the worship in the early hours of the Lord's Day, and the renewal of our baptismal vows is always an important part of the Vigil, whether there are baptism or not.

The primary reality to which the service points, though, is to the Lord's Table, where we affirm that "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us." The risen Christ has defeated death, and is present with and in his Church by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Martin Luther preached a sermon many years ago on this night, where he explores what happened in the time between Jesus' death and his resurrection. You may remember that the Apostles' Creed states that Jesus was "crucified, dead, and buried, and that he descended into hell."

Luther picks up on that and preaches a forceful and eloquent sermon. He states, "Our Lord Jesus Christ did descend into hell, battered hell open, overcame the devil, and delivered those who were held captive by the devil." [Martin Luther, "Sermon

for Easter Eve," in *Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, vol. 5, ed. and translated by Eugene F.A. Klug (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), pp. 476-89.]

I'm not sure how it all played out, but of this we are certain: God has raised Jesus, who was crucified, up to life, and has made him both Lord and Christ. Death has lost its victory, and the grave has lost its sting.

Jesus was obedient unto death, and did the Father's will. And now God has raised him up and given him a name above every other name, that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, on earth and under the earth and in heaven, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God.

This news is such Good News that we now enter a period of seven weeks to celebrate it and ruminate on it. The Great 50 Days of Easter.

So lift up your hearts tonight with joy. For death has been defeated, and Jesus is Lord. Thanks be to God for this unspeakable gift.

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