

Great Vigil of Easter April 16, 2022  
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**How Do We Celebrate Easter?**  
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

How are we to celebrate Easter? With new clothes and candy? It is different from Christmas. Should we send cards? It is different from other things we celebrate like birthdays and anniversaries. How do we celebrate something that cannot be explained and is believed or some struggle to believe? How do we celebrate Jesus being raised from the dead; raised to new life that is as mysterious as it is hopeful?

One of the ways the early church celebrated Easter was a special church service, or liturgy called the Great Vigil of Easter. The same liturgy we are present for tonight and some are watching from home. When I say 'early church' I mean the Christians in the first century, long before the Middle Ages. The followers of Jesus not long after his death, resurrection, and ascension. Before the church was an institution associated with governments and societies and rulers. For the early church, the foundation of their faith was Jesus' resurrection; and it was through this belief that they found hope to preserve even in times of suffering, persecution, and struggle.

Perhaps because the resurrection was central to their faith, the earliest Christians celebrated Easter with the most important church service of the year that began when the sun was setting on Saturday and didn't end until after the sun rose on Easter Sunday. The Great Vigil of Easter lasted all night and included some of the same things we have just done: lighting candles, praying or singing the ancient prayer called the Exultet, listening to scripture readings of the story of salvation, singing hymns or psalms and prayers – although they had many more than three readings. Baptism played a major role in this liturgy. It involved a separate room where people of all ages about to be baptized shed their clothing, were immersed in water and when they emerged from the water, were anointed with holy oil. Then they were clothed in new garments to signify their new life with the risen Christ. It was a ritual that symbolized Jesus' baptism and his death and resurrection at the same time. After that, the newly baptized went back into the main worship space where the service began anew with more scripture readings, prayers, hymn singing, a sermon and celebration of Holy Communion. Finally, there was a meal where everyone shared food they had prepared. It was complex, solemn, joyful, and glorious.

Over the last two thousand years, this special and ancient liturgy has been tamed and shortened to fit our different lifestyles. There are fewer readings, fewer hymns, and fewer prayers in the beginning part of the service. Instead of baptisms, we renew our baptismal vows. New clothing is something we might do as individuals, but it is not part of the liturgy. While the Russian and Greek Orthodox still have a fairly long and elaborate Great Vigil of Easter, many other Christian denominations like ours have shortened it to a few hours either on Saturday night before Easter Sunday or very early on Sunday morning. Despite the changes, we still hear complaints this service is too long and too different.

That's okay. There were complaints on that first Easter morning when the women went to the tomb and found Jesus wasn't where he was supposed to be. We heard in the Gospel reading there was also disbelief, grief, confusion, surprise, and amazement. Jesus' resurrection is not easy to understand, nor was it meant to be. That is why there were angels at the empty tomb. Angels tend to show up whenever God is up to something new, something we can't understand on our own. Angels help us refocus from our inability to understand to God's presence and God's delight in the situation. As scholar NT Wright has said, "one of the things that seems to give God pleasure is doing something when human resources appear to be inadequate."

Remember, angels showed up to Mary and Joseph before Jesus was born. Angels appeared to shepherds to tell them God is up to something amazing when Jesus was born, and they got to be part of it. The angels were at the tomb after Jesus' resurrection to help the women who went there remember Jesus had said he would be raised three days after he had died. In other words, God is up to something new, something amazing, something difficult to understand, something that apparently nothing we do or say can affect but we still can be part of. When the women and men who followed Jesus had nothing left but tears and grief, Jesus was still raised and there is no reason to look for him among the past, among the dead. That is the amazing thing about resurrection life, it takes what humanity has decided to throw away, or destroy and redeem it, raise it to this new kind of life.

One of my favorite prayers in the *Book of Common Prayer*, one we prayed a few moments ago, captures this understanding of resurrection life when it says, "let the whole world see and know that things that were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new..." In other words, resurrection life began with Jesus' resurrection and somehow is still with us, still at work in the world, still delighting God.

So, how are we -today- to celebrate Easter?

We are already celebrating by attending or watching this ancient church service. Maybe we could get some new clothes like the newly baptized in the early church. Or have a big meal. In addition, maybe we could try to listen to the angels and look for what is delighting God. To become more aware of what God is up to with this new kind of life in the world: raising up what was cast down, renewing that which was old, bringing all things into perfection through the risen Christ. Remember the suggested practice of giving up something for Lent? Maybe celebrating Easter could look like taking on a resurrection practice that can become part of our lives. Maybe we could practice seeing people we dislike with more compassion and less judgmentalism. Perhaps we could pray in new ways, like praying for the places we are in and people we share them with our homes, workplaces, dentist or doctor offices, schools, stores, the bike path or sidewalk outside the church, and of course the church. Through this practice we might become more aware of the people who share space with us by praying for them, wishing them peace and wellness. Resurrection life challenges us to look at things like decline with hope instead of nostalgia or despair and remember that when it looks like we are running out of resources, God is up to something new, something that isn't going back to the way things were, and we can be part of it.

Since Easter is so different, perhaps our celebration can be different, a bridge holding both the world we see, and God's love present in amazing ways. Alleluia! Christ is Risen!