

Easter Vigil

A sermon preached by Theodore S. Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, Pa at St Christopher's Episcopal Church, Oxford at the Easter Vigil, April 18, 1987.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Today was a busy day for me and my family. We were all getting ready for the Easter celebration. I had to take the garbage to the dump, visit someone in the hospital and pick up a gift for my in-laws who are coming on Tuesday. And then I had a lot of yard work to do so that everything would look nice for our dinner guests tomorrow. My wife was making preparations for Easter dinner and then went down to Newark to pick up my mother to be with us tomorrow. The boys played with their new rabbits that came just in time for Easter.

But Holy Saturday is a quiet day, too. It's the day when we ~~commemorate Christ's rest in the tomb. In most churches there are no~~ services during the daylight hours of Holy Saturday. It's at night that we begin the wonderful ceremonies in preparation for the greatest feast of the Church year. In the more liturgical churches the celebration of Holy Saturday begins with one of the most ancient services in the history of the church. We gather together to wait in prayer and expectation the message of the resurrection of Jesus.

The first part of our Easter Vigil is the Service of Light. In the Old Testament, fire or light was a sign of God's presence among his people. The Lord God appeared to Moses in the burning bush and he led the Israelites across the desert by a pillar of fire. In the New Testament we read that Jesus called himself the light of the world. And he promised that whoever follows him does not walk in darkness.

The Vigil service begins in the darkness of night. It's a darkness which suggests to us the darkness of sin and death. At the door of the church,

Father John struck a spark of new fire for the Paschal Candle. Sometimes the fire is started from a flint rock, and the darkness begins to turn to light. Then comes a beautiful ceremony which helps us to understand that Jesus has conquered sin by his resurrection. Father John, holding the tall Easter candle, said, "The light of Christ" and all of us responded, "Thanks be to God." Then he said it again, and a third time. Gradually this sanctuary became light. Then Father John placed the Candle in its stand where, according to the Book of Common Prayer, it will burn at all services from Easter Day through the Day of Pentecost as a sign that Jesus, the Risen Lord, is with us.

Outside, everything is growing dark and quiet. But inside everything is becoming light, the Paschal candle standing in the midst of us like a bright torch-of-victory. ~~And then after the liturgy of the Word and this homily~~ God brings into his family new members through the waters of baptism. They're washed with the baptismal water which cleanses and heals and gives new life and they are given candles to remind them that the light of Christ is with them. And after the baptisms and the renewal of our baptismal vows we come forward to join in the meal of the family of God.

But I must come back again to that candle with which we started off our Easter Vigil. As you come forward in a few moments to receive the bread and the wine and enter into communion with the Risen Christ, remember that Christ is the Light of the world. He was born in the night. And when he died the world turned dark. But the darkness has never been able to extinguish the Light. Christ died in the dark so that we might never have to fear the dark again. There is darkness in the world. There is darkness in our own hearts. But we'll never be overwhelmed by the darkness if we keep our eyes on Christ, the Light of the World. There is no

Christless dark anywhere. In the dark, Christ is there if we look. But after Easter, the dark can never be as dark as it was on Good Friday and Holy Saturday.