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Trinity Episcopal Church

Genesis 1:1 – 2:2

Exodus 14:10 – 15:1

Zephaniah 3:12 - 20

Romans 6: 3 – 11

Psalm 114

Luke 24: 1 – 12

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What makes tonight different than any other night? It is the age-old question asked every year by either the youngest or the oldest person present at the Jewish Seder, the feast of Passover. It is a night that remembers their release from captivity as slaves in Egypt, a night that remembers the moment of passing through the waters of the Red Sea, a night that remembers the beginning of a new life for the people of God. And it is the question for us tonight as we celebrate Christ our Passover who is sacrificed for us!

What makes this night different from any other night? Tonight is the holiest night of the whole Christian year. With a spark, a new fire, a new light, is brought forth, taking form and life. In this moment, a new fire, *our* new fire, is brought to birth, lighting our darkness and giving warmth. The flame catches hold and burns brightly, first in the wood, then in the oil and wax of our candles, and then reflected in our eyes, and finally, glowing within our hearts. A chain reaction of fire – passion, energy, spirit, life – wending its way from candle to candle to candle, connecting us in a circle, a communion of light. Light that rekindles hope, light that illuminates healing, light that guides us towards its source.

What is it about striking a match and lighting a fire that brings out the anticipation, the expectancy, the hope, however great or slight, that is within us? There is an existential connection that goes back much further than mere history. Something connects us to the rush of potency – both the danger and the possibilities – the passionate dance of the flames, the consuming drive of the fire. Something almost primeval stirs within us as we follow the light into our darkness: the physical darkness of the sanctuary, which is our metaphorical darkened tomb, but also into our own more personal, unspoken darkensses within.

Our fears and our anxieties, which loom so large in the dark, are brought down to size in the rush of hope for renewal, re-creation and resurrection. And that is what we celebrate tonight. Because that is what God has given to us in the crucifixion, but more importantly in the resurrection of Jesus, the Christ. On this night, led by the light of the Paschal Candle, we dare walk into the dark, because we know that God is present there as well as in the light. Our eyes sparkle with the reflected light as together we chant, “The Light of Christ!” “Thanks be to God!” And the Light of Christ scatters the darkness.

That is what makes tonight different than any other night of the year as the Jews would say for Passover. This is *our* Passover. This is the night when God has acted in love greater than we can possibly comprehend to save us from ourselves and from the ways of this world. Thanks be to God! On this night, we gather to remember and rejoice in how God has *always* acted in the past to save us, the people of God. And how God continues to do that for us now.

We remember by looking backwards and telling stories, but we also remember by looking ahead in hope. Not just to a life lived in union with God in the sweet by-and-by, but to a life lived in the here and now in the joy of our baptismal covenant. We are not just saved *from* something, as important as that is, we are also saved *for* something. We are not just saved from the power of sin and death, we are saved for the work that God has given us to do. The Hebrews have been saved time and again to be a light to the nations. We are saved, time and again, so that walking in newness of life, we might bear the light of Christ into the world in what we choose to say and how we choose to act.

This is the night in which we are so vividly reminded that we, as baptized people, are all new creations in Christ. We begin this night by recounting the stories of our people and by recalling our place in the family of the people of God. The stories we tell go way back into our Jewish roots, stories from the Hebrew Scriptures. As we gather around the Paschal Candle [the name comes from the Jewish word for Passover, *pesach*] to tell our stories, we are reminded that people have sat around the flames of candles and campfires for millennia, telling the very same stories we tell tonight. So in those stories, we feel the rhythm of time, the cycles of life, as we speak of God creating and bringing together all of the joy, the synchronicity and the harmony of the cosmos. We remember tonight, despite our brokenness, that God created humanity and it was very good. Our created nature *is* good, for we are indeed created in the image and likeness of the one and only Almighty God. We hear the rushing of the waters of the Red Sea gathered up and moving apart, and then the crashing waves as the water comes back together behind us, saving us, though at the cost of other human lives. We know that God has acted to preserve us from evil time and again, but perhaps never in such a magnificent and sweeping way. Until tonight, when we hear from Luke's Gospel the greatest news that has ever been shared: the news of the resurrection. God has acted in a very mighty way to save us through Jesus Christ once and for all.

This night is different from all the rest because on this night, we celebrate being given life, then passing from death into new life, just as the Hebrews do in their Passover as they escape from the Egyptians through the Red Sea waters. And we celebrate it one step further, because when we pass through death into new life, it is more than simply escaping our enemy and beginning a new life here. Our new life is resurrected life. Because all of the signs of God's saving grace in the Hebrew Scriptures – our creation, the covenants with Noah and with Abraham and Sarah, Moses leading the Israelites to the promised land, each time God restores the fortunes of Jerusalem – each of those for us, as Christians, point to the mystery and mighty act of grace that happens in Jesus Christ, who is the New Covenant. So for us as Christians, the old transitions into the new. This Vigil both invites us and initiates us into that mystery of salvation as we contemplate what it means that the old has passed away and the new life in Christ has begun.

You may have already noticed that the Great Vigil of Easter is not a spectator sport. We sing, we process, we share the light, we listen, we watch, we respond, we stand, we sit, we pray, we tell stories, we eat and we drink. No one gets to simply sit back and take it all in. There is nothing passive about tonight. Not because that's just how we do it, but because if we don't participate in the story, we can't find ourselves in the story. And tonight is all about story. If we don't allow this Paschal Candle to illumine the interiors of our own hearts and lives, then we miss the whole point of the Paschal joy. We miss the joy of creation, liberation, redemption and ultimately, resurrection. On this night, the universal Light of Christ comes into both our corporate darkness in this world and also our own particular darkneses.

And another reason why this night is like no other is that on this night, the Light of Christ comes into the life of Alison in a new way. This is her night in a very special way because it is her baptismal night. She begins a new life in God tonight. God has known Alison all along because God created Alison. But now, Alison will know God in a new way, as a bridge of redemption that spans the chasm of brokenness and evil between human and divine. And that bridge is Jesus Christ. The one through whom all things were made and the one whose voice all of the sheep know. A new fire is kindled in Alison's heart tonight, and she will learn to let that light shine out from her as she learns to live into her baptismal vows. Like all of us who are already baptized, Alison will be a sign of Christ's passionate love in this world.

I mentioned earlier that God's salvation through Jesus Christ saves us *from* and saves us *for*. It saves us *from* the power of sin and death and *from* the power of evil and darkness in this world. What God's grace saves us *for* is the work that God gives us to do in the world – our way of participating in the redemption of the world. And nowhere is that God-given work better spelled out than in our Baptismal Covenant which we will all be participating in shortly.

Tonight, we scatter the darkness from before us, which is symbolic of what we are to do in this world each day: be a light to the nations with the Light of Christ. Scattering the darkness, combatting evil not with evil but with good, bringing hope. That can look like a lot of different things in each of our lives and in our life together. Sometimes, it looks like helping refugees. Sometimes it looks like standing up against what we know is wrong and not just turning a blind eye. Sometimes it looks like feeding people who are hungry. Sometimes it looks like bringing comfort to those who are suffering in so many ways.

Yes, tonight is different than any other night because on this night, God has acted to save us. Just like the women at the tomb, we are invited to come and see, to experience the resurrection for ourselves, to know new life, to kindle a new fire of hope and expectancy. We are to be like the women who believe with awe and great joy the wonder of the resurrection before they ever experience the risen Christ. Then, and only then, can we go and tell. We go and let the whole world know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new. We go and tell the world about the Light of Christ, a light that can never be quenched. And we share that light especially with the darkest places in this world. In the words of Desmond Tutu, we are to let the world know by our words and actions that goodness is stronger than evil, that love is stronger than hate, that light is stronger than darkness and that life is stronger than death. That is the work for which we have been saved this night. What more is there to say but "Alleluia, Christ is risen!" Thanks be to God, Alleluia! +