

Easter Vigil Meditation

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Richmond Heights, Ohio

30 March 2013

Scholars of church worship often refer to this service as the Great Vigil of Easter, and if you look up this service in our own UCC Book of Worship, that's what you'll find it called. If you look at the front of your order of service, you'll see that name there, too, and I think there are at least two reasons it's called great.

The first is because there's a lot of it. It's great in the sense that the great wall of China is great: it's really, really big. This service is without question the largest and most complex of all the services this church hosts, and it has a lot of moving parts. In fact, there are four services rolled into one this evening, and those of you who have braved the elements and the darkness and the lateness of the hour to attend this service don't just get a two-fer, you get a four-fer.

You get first the Service of Light, in which we light the Paschal candle from the new fire and then light our own much smaller candles from that large candle carried by one of our young people; and then we follow that great candle representing Jesus as the light of the world in procession through the church building and into the sanctuary. Our lives as Christians are illuminated by the teachings and life and spiritual reality of Jesus Christ, the light of God that shines in and through our reason for being here tonight.

Then we listened to the story of salvation, from creation to re-creation, in the Service of the Word. Some of you may feel that that particular service drags on forever, but I have good news for you: our version is one of the shortest! Some churches use many more lessons than we do – twelve is often mentioned in the instructions for this service – each one followed by a sung or chanted psalm, which we omit altogether. And then each reading concludes with its own collect, that brief prayer that we all say together after each reading. The Service of the Word, all by itself, takes over an hour in some vigils – sometimes a few hours – but I know that if I tried that here, the people in attendance would be Karen and me.

But whether you get our more user-friendly version or the full Monty, no vigil is complete without hearing at least some of that great narrative arc that holds together the Bible and holds together our religion.

And then we renew our baptismal vows in the Service of Water, a reminder of the days when people who had been instructed in the basics of the Christian faith – folks called catechumens – were baptized. For many centuries and in many places, the Easter vigil was the only time during the year baptisms were conducted, unless an emergency necessitated baptism. The thinking of the church's theologians was that people who took on this label of Christian needed to know full well what kind of commitment they were making, and you couldn't do that unless you got the whole thing laid out before you, soup to nuts, as it were or, better, perhaps in our context, Genesis to Revelation. That's why adults – and infants, if necessary – were baptized when the whole complex of Christian theology and worship was on display.

When I sprinkle you in a few minutes with water from our baptismal bowl, I want you to remember not only your own baptism, but also remember and give thanks for all our sisters and brothers who are being baptized at this service this evening around the world, and they will number in the thousands or even tens of thousands. The Easter vigil

is a time of new growth for the Christian church, and that's a cause for quiet celebration.

And finally we will conclude the evening with the fourth service, the Service of the Table, which is the first communion service of Easter. As some of you remember from Maundy Thursday, our religion has a table at its center, and everything that customarily happens around a family table – eating, fellowship, refreshment, reconciliation – happens around ours. The communion table is the reminder of God's unbreakable commitment to us and of the undying love Jesus's resurrection confirms for us. The communion table is where we look both backward and forward: backward to the institution of the Lord's Supper the Thursday before Jesus was crucified, but also and more importantly we look forward to the culmination of God's realm, when the peace and sharing and generosity and love symbolized by our actions at the table are the norm for all creation for all eternity.

And having been refreshed at the table, where God is peculiarly present to us, we take that spiritual presence out into the world in our physical bodies as God's love incarnate.

That's what we do tonight, and that's why we call this service great. There's a lot to do, to be sure, but what we do is construct with the pieces of these four services the entire Christian faith. All the essentials of Christian theology and worship are found in this one service, which makes it unique among all our liturgical acts. And that comprehensiveness gives this service its deeper reason to be called great. Christianity, despite its problems and failures, is a great religion, and this service shows us in miniature why. All the themes, all the teachings, all the stories, all the gestures – they're all assembled here tonight in this one great service.

The Great Vigil of Easter launches the great season of Easter – Eastertide, as we sometimes call it – when we celebrate again the great good news of the world's redemption. As our young people might say, "How cool is that?" or as we who are older might ask, "How great is that?" And we might answer, "Great enough for a service like this."