

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on April 3, 2010 (Easter Vigil)

The Easter Vigil is a “rite of passage.” Not in the conventional sense. It’s not a mere formality, a custom we attend to because tradition so dictates. It’s not a rite of passage that keeps us in good social graces with our neighbors. It’s not a coming of age ritual. The Easter Vigil is a rite of *passage* because it takes us on a journey. The Vigil is a passage from darkness into light. A passage from sin into righteousness. A passage from Lent into Easter. A passage from death into life. And so, it is literally and spiritually a rite of *passage*.

And it’s not an easy passage. It is fraught with stumbling blocks and obstacles, barriers and snares. Through it we encounter the fallen-ness of humanity in the Garden of Eden and we recognize our own sinfulness. Through it we encounter a great flood and we encounter our own feelings of helplessness. Through it we encounter the stormy waters of the Red Sea and we recognize our own doubts. Through it we encounter Ezekiel’s Valley of Dry Bones and we encounter our own fears.

The Exsultet, that ancient hymn of praise, makes clear that the actions of tonight aren’t merely a memorial of what happened 2,000 years ago but are in fact taking place right now. The refrain “This is the night” effects we are fully a part of this pass-over from death to life. And so this is the night that, along with Christians throughout the world, we gain passage through the darkness of fear to the illumination of truth. This is the night we finally see the cross in its totality: not merely a means of death but the instrument of our salvation.

This is the night the walls and barriers come tumbling down. Barriers that keep us from the love of God, barriers that keep us from fully loving one another. This is the night the scales drop from our eyes. And we pass over from the old way of sin and death to new life in Christ. The sting of death is taken away, the grave is conquered and we thank God for leading us out of the slavery of sinfulness and into the freedom of forgiveness. Out of the wilderness of fear and into the Promised Land of love.

One of the reasons I so love this Vigil service is that we experience the whole scope of the Christian life. It’s not all about the brutality and guilt of the Passion; but it’s also not exclusively about the unbounded joy of Easter Day. The Christian experience is a life-long passage. There are periods of darkness and despair and doubt. But there are also periods of exhilaration and triumph and joy. And this night captures something of the complexity of our relationship with our risen Lord: there’s fumbling around in the darkness, the genuine possibility that one of us might actually get burned, there’s the power of sacred story and the genuine possibility that one of us might fall asleep, and just when we think we’re out of the water we get drenched with it. This is all a wonderful metaphor for our relationship with Jesus. It can be messy and uncomfortable but in the end it spells salvation. When we keep vigil with Christ and one another, we open ourselves to the possibilities and surprises of the fullness of relationship with God.

And in this sense, not only is this Vigil service a rite of passage, our entire lives as Christians are rites of passages. Passages from the temporal to the eternal. Passages from this life to the next. Passages from one liturgical season to another. We are a journeying people; our bags are always packed. We are always in transition. But the joy of the journey is that Christ is with us at every step of the way. Through the darkness of the shadow of death, the light of Christ burns ever more intensely. Through pain and grief we are never forsaken. He is our hope and salvation.

As with any passage, we come to the end of the journey transformed. We are at a different place from where we first embarked. We are indelibly changed. Every journey has its defining moments. Critical times when we decide whether to forge ahead or turn back. It is these moments of introspection that define our lives as Christian people. And when we realize that we could not have endured, except by the grace of God; and when we realize that we could not have kept going, except with God's help, then and only then have we completed the journey. We cannot make this passage without Jesus Christ. He is our guide and leader as well as our savior and redeemer.

And that's the triumph of Easter – we're not the ones responsible for this rite of passage. We cast our hopes and fears and sins upon Jesus Christ and he carries us through to the other side. Jesus is the vehicle by which we pass over from darkness to the bright light of divine mercy and truth. We're just along for the ride. Barriers that we couldn't possibly breach by ourselves are breached for us. And we pass through these barriers, not alone, but with Christ and with one another. And on this night of passage, as this rite of passage nears its destination, our response can only be 'Alleluia' and 'Amen.'