

A sermon delivered by
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Why is this night different from all other nights?

The Church of the Transfiguration
1 East 29th Street, New York, NY
Saturday, April 11, 2009
The Great Vigil of Easter

[Genesis 1:1-2:2 \[The Story of Creation\]](#)
[Genesis 7:1-5, 11-18, 8:6-18, 9:8-13 \[The Flood\]](#)
[Genesis 22:1-18 \[Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac\]](#)
[Exodus 14:10-15:1 \[Israel's deliverance at the Red Sea\]](#)
[Isaiah 4:2-6 \[God's Presence in a renewed Israel\]](#)
[Isaiah 55:1-11 \[Salvation offered freely to all\]](#)
[Ezekiel 36:24-28 \[A new heart and a new spirit\]](#)
[Ezekiel 37:1-14 \[The valley of dry bones\]](#)
[Zephaniah 3:12-20 \[The gathering of God's people\]](#)

At The Eucharist

[Romans 6:3-11](#)
[Matthew 28:1-10](#)

Introduction

A priest and a taxi driver both died and went to heaven. St. Peter was at the Pearly gates waiting for them.

'Come with me', said St. Peter to the taxi driver.

The taxi driver did as he was told and followed St. Peter to a mansion. It had anything you could imagine from a bowling alley to an Olympic size pool.

'Wow, thank you', said the taxi driver.

Next, St. Peter led the priest to a rugged old shack with a bunk bed and a little old television set.

'Wait, I think you are a little mixed up', said the priest. 'Shouldn't I be the one who gets the mansion? After all I was a priest, went to church every day, and preached God's word.'

'Yes, that's true. But during your sermons people slept. When the taxi driver drove, everyone prayed.'

Well, I hope I won't put any of you to sleep with this sermon.

It is a tradition to begin the Easter sermon with a joke in order to highlight the joy of this day and this new season. Lent is an austere time when we have deprived ourselves of certain things that bring us joy. Some of you have abstained from alcohol, others from chocolate. A parishioner asked me recently when exactly the fast could end. The answer is, "This is the night." This is the night that fasting ends and feasting begins.

Whether you chose to make a personal fast or not, you have been engaged in a communal fast with the rest of us. During the season of Lent the word *Alleluia* is omitted from our liturgies. It is too joyous a word to use in Lent. It means, "Praise the Lord" and is reserved for times of great joy. This is the night when Alleluia returns to our liturgical vocabulary. This is the night we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord and the gift of new life.

Passover Seder

This year the Jewish Passover and Christian Holy Week overlapped, as they occasionally do. For me, that brought to mind a Passover Seder that I participated in a few years ago. At that time I was training a group of multi-faith chaplain interns at Memorial Sloan-Kettering. The group was comprised of two Muslims, a Jewish rabbinical student, a Roman Catholic nun, and an Episcopal laywoman. The diversity among us was enriching. We were so intrigued by one another's religious traditions and eager to learn as much as we could. The rabbinic student led us in a Passover Seder to give us the experience that Jews have each year at this time.

I remember being struck by one of the questions asked during the Seder: "Why is this night different from all other nights?" That is one of the questions the youngest child traditionally asks. And it is an opportunity for Jews to tell their sacred story of being brought out of the land of Egypt as slaves. But they don't just tell it. The question is not, "Why *was that night* different from all other nights?" It is not asked in the past tense, but in the present. "Why *is this night* different from all other nights?"

What they do every year is make the past present again in their own lives by recalling that most holy night when the Jews were set free from bondage to Pharaoh. Of course, no one still living was there on that night, but that night was so profound that they recapitulate it – that is, they reach back into time, grab hold of that night and bring it forward to the present – and make it their own. Time bends, or folds as Fr. McPherson said in a recent sermon.

That question in the Seder reminded me of something in tonight's liturgy, but I couldn't put my finger on what it was at the time. But I eventually figured it out. That important question in the Passover Seder reminded me of an important statement that we heard beautifully proclaimed three times by our Deacon tonight.

This is the Night

“This is the night.”

Do you remember hearing that phrase just moments ago when we gathered around the Paschal candle? She chanted:

“This is the night, when you brought our fathers, the children of Israel, out of bondage in Egypt, and led them through the Red Sea on dry land.”

“This is the night, when all who believe in Christ are delivered from the gloom of sin, and are restored to grace and holiness of life.”

“This is the night, when Christ broke the bonds of death and hell, and rose victorious from the grave.”

We are people of the light who dwell in a dark world when, as theologian Jim Farwell put it, “women struggle for recognition for their humanity, when one person strikes another in hate, when the experience of beauty brings sorrow with the knowledge of its impermanence, when terrorists slaughter thousands, when thousands die daily from hunger, when growing up means letting go, and when the parent grieves at the untimely loss of a child.”

The night can remind us of how lonely and scary our existence can be. But even as we cry out in the darkness of pain and catastrophe, we cry in joy at the imminent dawn because Christ has overcome death and grave. He is risen! And because he is risen, we have reason to celebrate this night.

Why is this night different from all other nights? Because this is the night when we pass over from death to life. This is the night when light overcomes darkness and we receive our salvation. This is the night when we are empowered to reach out in love to the world and share in its suffering.

Let this night be about more than feasting – more than about eating chocolate and drinking wine after a long 40 days without it. Let this night be about the restoration of our joy – the restoration of “Alleluia” to our vocabulary – because Christ is risen from the dead and we have been given new life to share with the world. Let this night be a turning point in our lives when we look back at it and remember how we turned from the darkness of our sins to the light of grace and holiness, and from bondage to freedom.

This is the night.