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Church of the Holy Faith
The Great Vigil of Easter
Mark 16:1-8
March 30, 2024

Total Eclipse

Light and Darkness. In no other liturgy of our church are the themes of light and darkness so pronounced as they are at our Easter Vigil. In Jewish tradition, the sabbath begins at sundown and ends at nightfall. Mark's gospel tells us Mary Magdelene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices when the sabbath was over, so that they might go and anoint Jesus' body. While we don't know exactly when they ventured out, I imagine them huddled together, crying and consoling one another, eager to properly honor Jesus' body as soon as possible. I picture them rushing out to procure spices the very minute the sabbath was over. We too, after forty days of Lent and the heaviness of the last three days, are eager for the resurrection. This is why, on this holy night, before the lilies and Easter eggs, before the flowered crosses and hot cross buns, we begin, as soon as possible, in near darkness, to celebrate the first service of Easter. We ignite the new fire, and from that fire, the Paschal Candle is lit. Paschal – the Feast of the Passover, the Passover from death to life.

In a little over a week, many in parts of our country will have the unique experience of witnessing a solar eclipse. Cities in the “path of totality” are bracing themselves for the onslaught of eclipse watchers. People are traveling from all over the world to see it – some of you are, too, I know. As the moon passes between the Sun and Earth, the light from the sun will be partially blocked, then completely blocked at the brief point of totality. A normal day will turn dark. Then slowly, the light from the sun will reemerge into brightness, a light so intense viewers are warned to wear special glasses.

What a great metaphor for what we have experienced this past week and for the richness of this Easter Vigil service! We have traveled from the ordinariness of our lives through the darkness of the crucifixion and into the tomb. As the Paschal Candle was brought into the church, we witnessed the growing light of Christ's love, as light and love were passed from one person to another. We have shared together stories of how, time after time, God creates order out of chaos, liberation out of oppression, hope out of despair, and life out of death. These stories reach their crescendo as the women carrying spices approach Jesus' tomb at the break of dawn, expecting to find no life. Instead, something wonderful, something earth-shattering has happened in the darkness. Jesus is not there. He has been raised! As was sung in the Exsultet, "This is the night when Christ broke the bonds of death and hell." As our Collect states, God "made this most holy night to shine with the glory of the Lord's resurrection." I gotta tell you, the light of the resurrection is so intense, there's no special glasses in the world you can hide behind. Nor would you want to. In conclusion, I'd like to read you the paschal homily of the great Saint John Chrysostom, a homily read every year at Easter in the Orthodox Church at their vigil. I pray it brings as much of the joy and brilliance of the resurrection to you as it has to me:

If any man be devout and love God, let him enjoy this fair and radiant triumphal feast. If any man be a wise servant, let him rejoicing enter into the joy of his Lord. If any have labored long in fasting, let him now receive his recompense. If any have wrought from the first hour, let him today receive his just reward. If any have come at the third hour, let him with thankfulness keep the feast. If any have arrived at the sixth hour, let him have no misgivings; because he shall in nowise be deprived thereof. If any have delayed until the ninth hour, let him draw near, fearing nothing. If any have tarried even until the eleventh hour, let him, also, be not alarmed at his tardiness; for the Lord, who is jealous of his honor, will accept the last even as the first; He gives

rest unto him who comes at the eleventh hour, even as unto him who has wrought from the first hour. And He shows mercy upon the last, and cares for the first; and to the one He gives, and upon the other He bestows gifts. And He both accepts the deeds, and welcomes the intention, and honors the acts and praises the offering.

Wherefore, enter you all into the joy of your Lord; and receive your reward, both the first, and likewise the second. You rich and poor together, hold high festival. You sober and you heedless, honor the day. Rejoice today, both you who have fasted and you who have disregarded the fast. The table is full-laden; feast ye all sumptuously. The calf is fatted; let no one go hungry away. Enjoy ye all the feast of faith: Receive ye all the riches of loving-kindness. let no one bewail his poverty, for the universal kingdom has been revealed. Let no one weep for his iniquities, for pardon has shown forth from the grave. Let no one fear death, for the Savior's death has set us free. He that was held prisoner of it has annihilated it. By descending into Hell, He made Hell captive. He embittered it when it tasted of His flesh. And Isaiah, foretelling this, did cry: Hell, said he, was embittered, when it encountered Thee in the lower regions. It was embittered, for it was abolished. It was embittered, for it was mocked. It was embittered, for it was slain. It was embittered, for it was overthrown. It was embittered, for it was fettered in chains. It took a body, and met God face to face. It took earth, and encountered Heaven. It took that which was seen, and fell upon the unseen. O Death, where is your sting? O Hell, where is your victory? Christ is risen, **(he is risen)** and you are overthrown. Christ is risen, **(he is risen)** and the demons are fallen. Christ is risen, **(he is risen)** and the angels rejoice. Christ is risen, **(he is risen)** and life reigns. Christ is risen, **(he is risen)** and not one dead remains in the grave.

For Christ, being risen from the dead, is become the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

To Him be glory and dominion unto ages of ages. Amen. Alleluia!