

I didn't discover the Easter Vigil service until I was in my 20's and it has been my favorite service ever since. I love the many dimensions – the new fire, the story telling and then the arrival of Easter, when we turn on the lights, ring bells and we catch our first glimpse of the beautiful Easter flowers. I must confess though that my favorite part is the lighting of the fire. At all the churches I have been at, it is always approached with some trepidation – will the fire catch properly, will it last just long enough, will the fire alarms be set off (which can still happen even if you are outside the church and happen to have a very smoky fire)? The biggest fear is of course that the church will somehow get set on fire.

But so far at every Vigil I have been to, everything has been just fine - the fire is started –a tiny flame at first that breaks into the blackness of a cold spring evening and sometimes a warm one. A flame lights up the darkness of a church and is then spread all around to each person who holds it in their hand. A flicker in the night brings the joy of Easter and the promise of new life – new life made possible in God.

But new life is not new in our story of our life with God. It has always been about new life - from the very beginning. It has always been about God renewing us. Think of the stories we heard earlier from the Old Testament. In the creation of the world, we are given the promise of new life – new life in a new world with night and day, creatures of every kind including sea monsters, humankind made in the image of God and it was all very good. In the story of Exodus, God promises new life to the people enslaved by the Egyptians. The sea is parted and the Israelites escape to their new life in the Promised Land. In Ezekiel we hear a vision of *“of God's breath bringing our tired old bones back to life, and not just life but new life. God's own spirit will be placed in our hearts, and we shall live, really live in a whole new way. God will be in every breath we take!”*ⁱ

God has been renewing us from the very beginning, but we do not listen to God so well. Adam and Eve got thrown out of the Garden. The Israelites complained and disobeyed so that the generation that left Egypt never got to go to the Promised Land. It was their children that went. The exiles that Ezekiel was speaking to resisted his prophecies. They didn't want to hear about the new salvation. They wanted things the way they were before they were exiled. But God had a plan – I will send my Son. The people will hear him and know that they are loved. They will know that I will give them new life. And God sent his Son, Jesus, who was hung on a cross and was raised to life so that we would know that new life was possible for all of us.

In the reading from the Gospel of Matthew, which we just heard, we are at the beginning of this new life, the beginning of us understanding what Jesus had been

talking about while he was here on earth. In the gospel reading, when the women go to see the tomb of Jesus, there is an earthquake and an angel appears to them – an angel whose appearance is like lightning. The angel shows them the empty tomb and tells them that Jesus has been raised from the dead and indeed he has. As they go with fear and joy to tell the disciples what they have seen and heard, Jesus greets them. The women hold his feet and worship him. He is alive. He has been raised from the dead. They finally begin to understand the strange words of Jesus when he said “*The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised.*”ⁱⁱ

Jesus was raised and a new covenant was given to God’s people. A small band of people went out and spread Jesus’ message of love and the new life that God promises to the world. They came to be called Christians and the Jesus’ message spread across the world. Two thousand years later, we still don’t hear God’s message of new life very well. We still don’t hear that God wants to renew us - not just at the end of our lives but right now, but we have a reminder. The flame that is kindled in the dark night reminds us that the light of Christ breaks through the darkness and into our hearts so that we can have new life. The flame reminds us that we can let go of the things that weigh us down, worry us and keep us away from God. We can be renewed. We can be transformed into the people God intended us to be.

The flame of the new Easter fire isn’t the only thing that reminds us. We are reminded of God’s renewal when we worship together as the Body of Christ. We are reminded every time we come to the table to receive the body and blood of Christ. We are reminded when we go out as Body of Christ into the world and do God’s work – spreading the message of God’s love. God has promised to make us new. The light of Christ is lit within each of us. When the flame of the new fire is kindled – it is supposed to set the church on fire – not the church building but us – the people of God. We are the church that goes out to spread God’s message of new life in this world. Each of us is to be lit up and brought to new life with the fire of Christ inside of us. Jesus has been raised – go forth and let the fire of Christ burn brightly in you.

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ⁱⁱ Matthew 17:23, New Revised Standard Version.