

An Easter Vigil

A service for the evening of Holy Saturday by Andrew O'Neill

Putting off sleep to watch and pray, we gathered in late evening darkness. In the preceding days, we had travelled deeper into shadow, from table to cross to tomb. The chapel was unlit and unadorned, having been stripped bare on Good Friday. On this night, however, we were gathered to usher in the Day of Resurrection and the rising of our hope and joy.

In silence, a single candle, lit outside, was carried in toward the baptismal font. Laid in the water of rebirth and blessed, the Christ light was shared throughout the sanctuary. A single voice proclaimed in a low intonation the first alleluia since the beginning of Lent. Rising in pitch and intensity, the alleluia grew into a chorus as the light of Christ brightened and warmed the chapel. Suddenly, it was midnight, and the bells signalled the dawn of another Easter morning.

The Easter Vigil is observed on the evening of Holy Saturday, following Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. First celebrated in the Armenian Orthodox Church, adapted in the Western church, and now practised in many Christian denominations, the vigil has recently grown in popularity in United Church worship. Its resurrection symbolism is rich—blessing a new Christ candle, renewing baptismal vows, sharing communion—all proclaiming and enacting God's promise of transformation.

What follows is a sample liturgy for celebrating the Easter Vigil in your congregation. It follows the basic structure outlined in *Celebrate God's Presence*, but has been adapted and described in order to be used by congregations celebrating this worship service for the first time. Normally, the vigil begins before midnight on Saturday and ends early Sunday morning. If you are celebrating baptism during the vigil, you may want to start a little earlier.

SERVICE OF LIGHT

Worship begins in silence and darkness. Obviously, some low lighting may be necessary, but should be as minimal as possible. The following refrain from the Taizé community is intended to be repeated many times, to draw the community into deeper reflection.

Refrain

Voices United #950, "Stay With Me"

Opening Prayer

From the middle or back of the assembly.

Friends in Christ, on this night we watch and pray for the eternal light of the world.

In prayer and song we recall the great story of faith.

By water and the Spirit we renew our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ.

In communion with God's people everywhere, we celebrate the gift of resurrection.

Lighting the New Fire

The fire is kindled outside, and the flame is brought in by a taper.

Light and dark were the first day, O God, and you called your creation good.

By night, you are our guard and keeper.

By day, you rise with us and greet us in love.

Bless this darkness, O God, and prepare us to rejoice with earth and heaven.

Bless this light, O God; may it restore our vision, rekindle our faith,

and renew our hope in your kingdom vision for all.

Lighting the Christ Candle

The Light of Christ.

Thanks be to God.

Hymn

During this hymn, the Christ candle is lit, and the congregation's candles are lit from it. Finally, all lights are turned on, and any other sanctuary candles are lit. Any black cloth used for Good Friday should be removed and the chancel restored for Easter.

*Voices United #179, "Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Give Thanks";
Voices United #172, "Now Christ Is Risen"*

Easter Proclamation

Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

SERVICE OF THE WORD

The Story of Faith

The number of readings, and which are chosen, varies greatly. The original Armenian rite included 12 readings, the Anglican Book of Alternative Services calls for 10, and the current Roman Catholic celebration includes seven. However, at the very least, the stories of creation and Exodus and a reading from one of the prophets should be included. Readings may be abbreviated.

The readings chosen here are a representative sample of all available rites and trace a path through the history of salvation as proclaimed in the Hebrew scriptures, from creation to new life. This conveys the clear message that God has always, and is always, creating and recreating.

Each reading may be followed either by a responsive blessing or a brief optional prayer. Alternatively, a Taizé response would be fitting (e.g., Voices United #955, “Dona nobis pacem”).

Genesis 1:1–3:24 (Story of Creation)

Response

Receive the word of God’s desire and love for all creation.

Amen.

Prayer

Loving God, from the beginning you intended all things for goodness.

Guide us now in the fulfillment of your faithful promise:

Light, and life, and love for all the world. Amen.

Exodus 14: 15–30 (Crossing the Red Sea)

Response

This is God’s unwavering commitment to deliverance and dignity.

Thanks be to God.

Prayer

By your vision of justice and peace you delivered Israel, O God.

Through crashing waters you delivered them to hope.

May all people know the liberty of your love, and rejoice.

Amen.

Jeremiah 31:31–34 (A New Covenant)

Response

Write your law upon our hearts, O God.

That we might know you and share your merciful love.

Prayer

Holy One, the law of love is written on our hearts.

May we live each day with compassion and mercy,

and in our living, share them with others. **Amen.**

Isaiah 55:1-11 (Invitation to Abundant Life)

Response

The prophet’s song of abundant life.

Let us rejoice and be glad.

Prayer

God of grace, by your Spirit you renew the earth and all things.

By your truth, may we bring into balance our needs and the needs of others,

that we might be a blessing to the world. **Amen.**

Ezekiel 37: 1-14 (Valley of Dry Bones)

Response

By hope, the Source of Life restores us.

In love, we are reborn.

Prayer

Living God, who weaves together the strands of our living and dying,

revive our hearts and minds.

Breathe life into our song of faith,

That we might be restored, now and always. **Amen.**

Responsive Psalm (Voices United #837, Psalm 118)

It is common to respond to the reading of Hebrew scripture with a psalm, facilitating the congregation’s response to the story of faith. The psalm may also be incorporated as one of the readings.

Gospel

The reading of scripture culminates with a gospel account of the resurrection.

Matthew 28:1–10 OR Mark 16:1–8 OR Luke 24:1–12

Hymn

Voices United #164, “The Day of Resurrection”

Sermon

“Remember how he told you...that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again” (Luke 24: 6–7).

The challenge during all of Easter is moving from memory to hope. In recalling Jesus’ Passion and enacting our faith in baptism and communion, we are also testifying to a living hope in God’s vision for humanity. The story of Jesus is not only an ancient story, or the story of our personal trials and faith, but also the story God intends for the world. The injustice of Jesus’ death is overcome, and the violence of the past days is replaced by peace.

The empty tomb invites us to see hope where there is hopelessness. Although this sermon should be brief, it should name situations where hope is required. The preacher will do well to begin with a personal example of resurrection—of new life arising out of loss—and to speak about healing and new life in the world.

Hymn

These hymns are suggested as preparation for the Service of the Water.

Voices United #448, “We Know That Christ Is Raised”; Voices United #451, “This Is the Spirit’s Entry Now”; Voices United #453, “Out of Deep, Unordered Water”

SERVICE OF THE WATER

Baptism (and/or Confirmation)

Baptism at such a late service would normally be for older candidates so, depending on the congregation’s practice, this could be a celebration of baptism and/or confirmation. The congregation’s customary liturgies would be used here, including the Renewal of Baptismal Vows. If there are no candidates for baptism, worship would continue with the Renewal of Baptismal Vows and could use the liturgy described below.

This part of worship might begin with a small ritual where each candidate places a tea light on a vertical cross with small ledges, further illuminating the sanctuary. Alternatively, candidates could have previously written their names on small white stones, and at the beginning of the Service of Water, place them around the baptismal font.

Renewal of Baptismal Vows

The enactment of renewal could include Asperges (from the Latin “to cleanse”), where the congregation is sprinkled (gently) with droplets of water. This is traditional, unusual, and therefore, distinctly memorable. An evergreen branch works well. Alternatively, the congregation could be called forward to be blessed by water.

Blessing the Waters

God be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to God.

Let us give our thanks to God.

It is good to give God thanks and praise.

Gracious and Holy God,
we bless you for the gift of life,
and within it, the gift of water.

Over its unshaped promise your Spirit hovered at creation.
By water comes the growth of the earth.
Through water you led the children of Israel to freedom.
In the waters of the Jordan, your child, Jesus, was baptized.

Now may your Spirit be upon us and what we do,
that this water may be a sign for all of new life in Christ:
the rebirth of the earth and your promise of peace and justice,
the renewal of right relationship with all our neighbours,
and the restoration of life and hope to all your people
everywhere. **Amen.**

A New Creed (unison)

If Asperges is included, the congregation is sprinkled with water while the United Church’s A New Creed is prayed.

SERVICE OF THE TABLE

Communion Hymn

Voices United #456, “Now to Your Table Spread”; Voices United #463, “Deck Yourself, My Soul, with Gladness”; Voices United #480, “Let Us Break Bread Together”

Holy Communion

Here also, the congregation’s customary order of Holy Communion can be used, otherwise “Prayer B” in Celebrate God’s Presence, pages 243–245 provides a helpful starting point. The Great Thanksgiving prayer should refer to the scriptures read during the vigil.

Hymn

Voices United #155/157, “Jesus Christ Is Risen Today”

Benediction and Commissioning

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VIGIL ADVICE

THERE ARE TWO THINGS TO NOTE WHEN EMBARKING ON A VIGIL FOR THE FIRST TIME. First, congregations will want to give careful thought to the choice and translation of scripture used. For example, the Passion narrative in the Gospel of John refers to the high priests and the crowds as simply “the Jews.” Historically, uncritical readings of scripture have been cited to justify appalling acts of anti-Semitism, the spectre of which can feel close during Holy Week. Thoughtful translations and critical exegesis for preaching will help address this concern. See *Celebrate God’s Presence*, page 177 for examples of appropriate word changes.

Second, the vigil is an exciting and meaningful culmination of the Easter story. Through Holy Week, especially Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, we share the story of Jesus’ Passion and our communal prayers for the suffering of the world. Congregations interested in the vigil will want to consider it as part of the whole Holy Week experience of life, death, and life again.